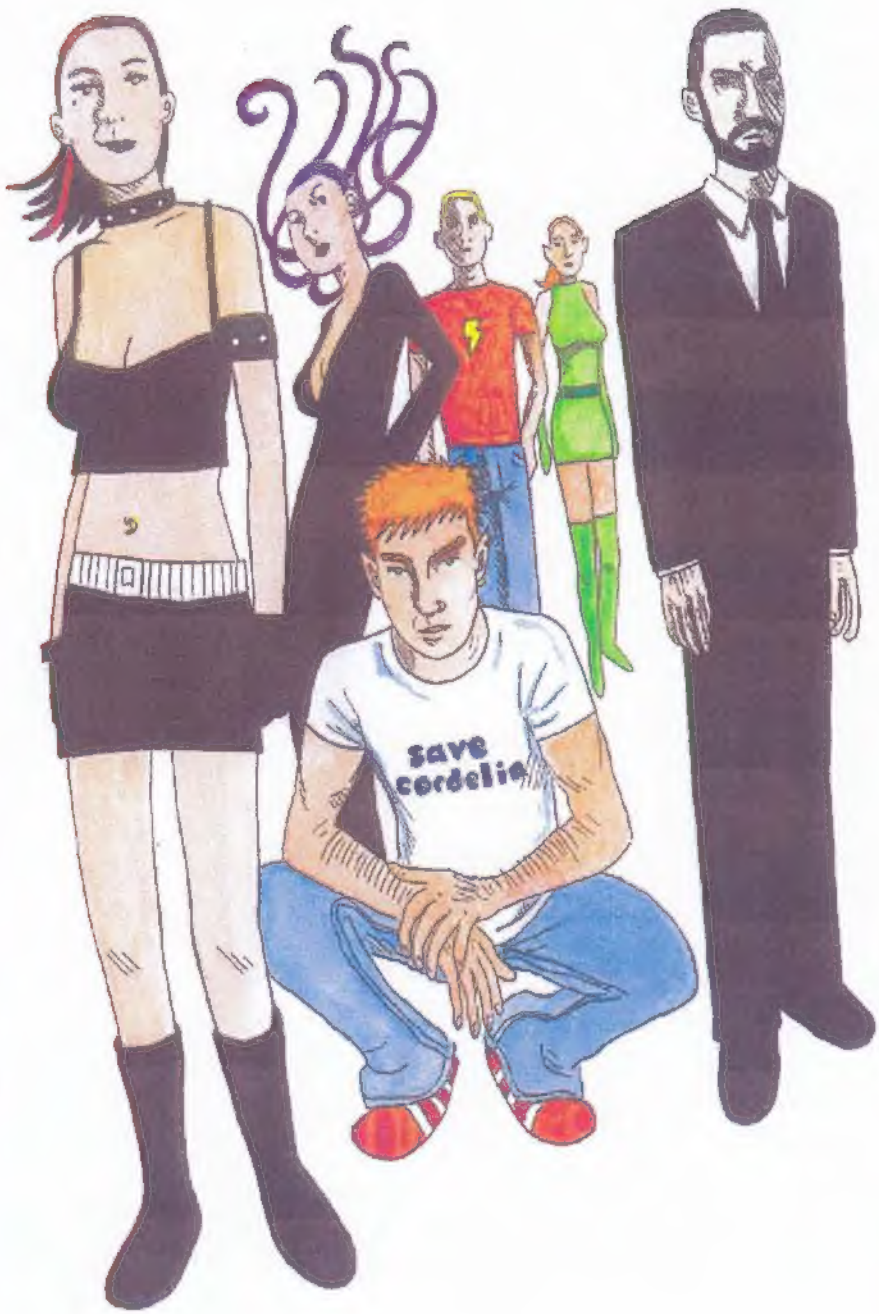
R/E

a wake up call for UK comics

R/E Number 1



FEATURING:

Interviews- Martin Eden/Warren Ellis/Terry Moore/Ian Gibson/Pantomime Press

Articles- 2000AD/Don Lawrence Pt1/Con Reports/Panelogy

Reviews: Incorporating TRS2

Plus all the news, previews and rumours from a comics industry you never knew existed

ACCENT UK

THE SMALL PRINT:

COVER: BY MARTIN EDEN

REDEYE MAGAZINE ISSUE 1 is edited by Barry Renshaw, and published by the ACCENT UK COLLECTIVE, Quarterly, November 2003 second printing. The views expressed herein are not necessarily the views held by the magazine or its editor, so if someone said your comic was crap, take it up with them. All artwork and text is copyright 2003 their respective owners and used purely in a news/ review/ informative capacity, and no infringement of copyright is intended nor should be inferred. If anything has been incorrectly credited please let me know asap. For any further information on ACCENT UK, ENGINE COMICS or the content of this magazine, contact editor Barry Renshaw at editor@enginecomics.co.uk and/or see the website: www.enginecomics.co.uk.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:
Thanks to every reader and retailer who picks this up and enjoys it, and if you didn't let me know why. Special thanks to the ACCENT UK lads for support and advice, and to the highly dedicated crack team of investigative reporters that are this issues contributors: Alan Donald, Dave West, Gary Simpson, Stu Young, Paul Gravett, Steve Betts, Kev F Sutherland, Chris Weston, Walter Dragonbuckle, Chris Atkins, the TRS2 team, Gordon Johnston, Colin Dinnie, and the many creators who have been involved in making this magazine come to life. Extra special thanks to wife to be Julie for endless cups of tea and patience.

This premier issue is dedicated to the man responsible for getting me into comics in the first place: Mr Ronald Renshaw.

ADVERTISING RATES:

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DEADLINE DATES FOR SUBMISSIONS AND ADS:
ISSUE 2: 1st Febuary 2004
ISSUE 3: 1st July 2004
ISSUE 4: 1st October 2004

Editorial

"Tick tock, said the comic book editor..."

3.21PM. I'm literally counting down the minutes, wondering if I'll get this done and to the printers in time. It closes at 5.15. Half hour on the bus, ten minute walk. Waiting for printer to finish. Come on. Tick tock. This will be the last page to print, and of course the last to be completed. I'll shuffle the pages around, mark things to be moved to the website to balance page counts, do a final spell check. Tick tock. What I've realised in the last few months I've been pulling together REDEYE ISSUE ONE, what I billed and hoped would become a COMICS INTERNATIONAL for UK comics, is that its a bloody big job. Bigger than I imagined, bigger than editing the anthology even. I was lucky that out of the countless emails sent, a solid bullpen of contributors came back to us with great submissions for articles and interviews that you'll find listed below. Even a few enterprising individuals were kind enough to help out with printing costs and took out ads. And as an impressively thick wedge of paper it has become, I still can't help but be disappointed. Because small press/self publishing creators constantly bemoan the lack of publicity and marketing tools available to them, yet when a few individuals make the effort to try and change that situation, all of a sudden it goes quiet. An example of this is sp veteran Shane Chebsey's ambitious glossy colour COMICS ADVERTISER, a free paper sent to every comic shop in the country. Only a handful came forward to take out a reasonably priced ad. Because of the lack of takers, Shane has had to abandon it with issue two. God knows how much money went into that. Tick tock.

A quarter the way through now. UK comics have taken such an upsurge in quality and quantity in recent years that COMICS INTERNATIONAL have devoted precious page space to help them out, thanks to the sterling organisational efforts of the THERE GOES TOKYO crew, other sp veterans. You'll notice in the UK scene, as well as this magazine, the same names that appear time and again. Why is that? Its not any great urge to continually see your name in print, I'm sure. It just seems out of the no doubt hundreds of self publishers in the country (300 of which have bought the SELF PUBLISHING GUIDE so I'm sure there's a hell of a lot more than that), only a handful seem to want to sound the horns and beat the drums. Why don't people talk to each other? We all have jobs and commitments in the real world, but surely by the act of creating your own comics you would want to share that labour of love? Don't they want their work to be read by other people? Tick tock.

3.51. This editorial has turned out a bit more melancholic than I intended really. Its a fine fine I suppose between trying to raise a point and getting on a soapbox. This is a joyous time for comics but it seems people can't or won't take advantage of it. I don't expect everyone to come forward and start taking out £100 colour ads, or start doing tours of comic shops nationwide to promote their books, though both would be nice. But if you look towards the collectives that have started to appear, like ACCENT UK, THERE GOES TOKYO and NICE, which comprise only a fraction of what is out there, you have to wonder what about everyone else. There's networks and mailing lists and help galore to both newcomers and vets. It's there if you want it. So what are you waiting for?

Tick tock.

- BARRY RENSHAW, EDITOR

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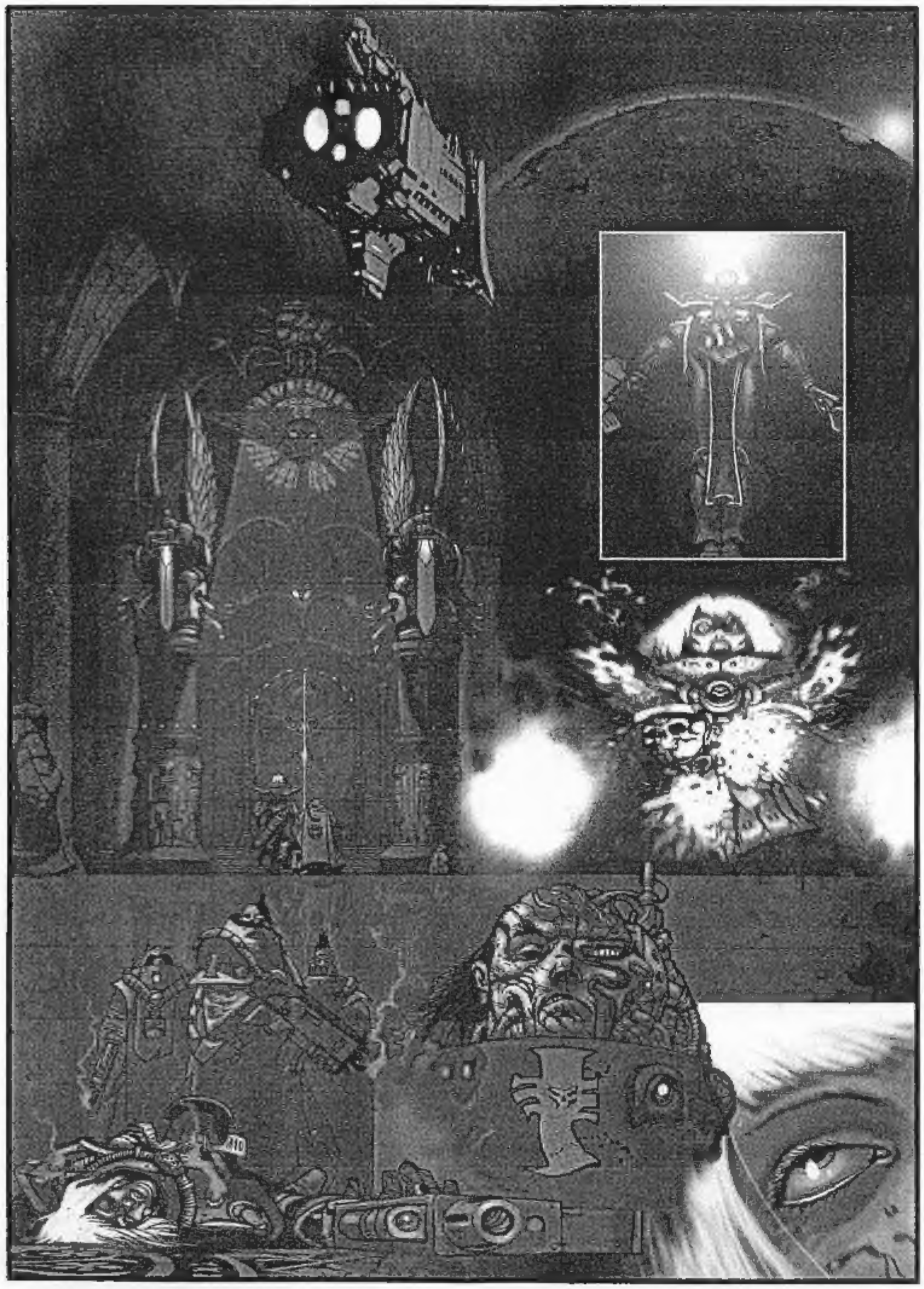
"Let the Galaxy burn!"



There's a change in the wind for the art teams in two of Warhammer Monthly's flagship strips.

The Sharp Brothers will be vacating the artist berth on *Hellbrandt Grimm* to take over from Karl Richardson on the second book of the critically acclaimed *Lone Wolves*. Meanwhile, John Stokes (*The Invisibles*, *American Century*) will be taking over as artist on the third book of *Hellbrandt Grimm*. Both Dan Abnett (*Legion*, *i-Candy*) and Mitchel Scanlon will remain as writers of *Lone Wolves* and *Hellbrandt Grimm* respectively.

The change of artists marks the start of an exciting period for Warhammer Monthly. The award-winning *Daemonifuge* returns for a third book (see EYECANDY later in this issue), now helmed by the well-alliterated creative team of Si Spurrier and Tiernen Trevallion. With Ephrael Stern in the clutches of Ahriman the Black, it's going to take desperate measures to escape. The first episode, which runs in May 2004's issue 81, finishes with what is billed to be *the* surprise ending of the year.

Kal Jerico is back in 2004 and he's reunited with his regular creative team of Gordon Rennie (*Missionary Man*, *Judge Dredd*) and Wayne Reynolds (*Missionary Man*, *Judge Dredd*). *Kal Jerico: Crimson Tide* commences in Warhammer Monthly issue 79 and features the return of two of Kal's longest standing villains as well as one of his most tenuous allies.

The rest of Warhammer Monthly's roster for 2004 is just as impressive with one-off and ongoing strips featuring the talents of Ian Edgington (*Scion*, *Sojourn*), Logan Lubera (*Outlaw 7*, *BTVS: Oz*), Kev Hopgood (*Iron Man*), Anthony Williams (*Deadpool*), Simon Coleby (*The Eternal*), Jon Haward (*Spectacular Spider-man*), Mike Collins, Richard Elson, Dylan Teague with more to come.

WARHAMMER MONTHLY is available monthly from, most newsagents and GAMES WORKSHOP stores.

Out with the old, in with the new for WARHAMMER in 2004

Wonder Stuff

Three tier funnies have been around almost as long as the newspapers they appear in. Now a Northern Ireland based creator is looking to break into the biggest syndication industry in the world: America.

Captain Wonder is the comic creation of cartoonist, John Farrelly. The self-published black and white comic features the adventures of a portly superhero done in a newspaper comic strip style. "There is an overall story-arc," Farrelly says, "but I broke it up into gag strips so that each three or four panel strip could be read on its own or as part of a larger whole. The first issue deals with Captain Wonder's origin, naturally."

Issue one, published in November, shows how forty-year old comic shop owner Charley Winkle becomes Captain Wonder when his business is threatened with bankruptcy. "Really what it's about is a man going through his mid-life crisis. Since he was a kid, Charley has always loved superheroes. When the opportunity comes along to actually become one, he doesn't hesitate, despite his lack of traditional heroic qualities. He has a good heart, though, and that's what counts.

"The reason I'm doing it this way is because I will eventually be submitting my best stuff for consideration for syndication in the US, but I know the likelihood of this happening is slim. But because I think Captain Wonder is funny, I'd like to get it out to an audience."

What's different about the Captain, says John, is that he's a more realistic superhero, albeit drawn in a cartoon style. "I wanted to examine the same issues as *Watchmen* addressed, as in what would the world be like with a real superhero? What kind of everyday problems would this hero face? The Captain endures many problems that Batman and Superman never have to face. He gets stopped for speeding, for instance, and when the cop asks for his real name and he won't give it, he gets arrested. That kind of thing. The irony is that Cap's 'secret' identity is about the worst-kept secret in Bigopolis City."

Other characters include Woody, Cap's sarcastic teenage sidekick, who also happens to be Charley's nephew. There's also Woody's mum, Wilhomena, who provides some sanity in the Winkle household. "Ultimately, I wanted this to be a family strip," says Farrelly. "It's a situation comedy, and most sit-coms revolve around a family. Most of the comedy doesn't come from traditional gags, but from the characters interacting."

Of course, Captain Wonder has an arch-nemesis called General Mayhem, who is as bad at being bad as CW is at being good. There's also the long-suffering police Lieutenant Kowolski and the dodgy rooftop guru, The Great Humperdinck. "I have enough material to keep me going for many a year," Farrelly says. "I'm just warning you now."

Captain Wonder *issue 1 will be available from November 2003. To order a copy, e-mail* captainwondercartoons@hotmail.com. *The price is £1.95 including p&p.*

Hybrid Theory

ZIP GUN COMICS, the prolific Liverpool based small press collective, have previously successfully produced JAPAN! and NOIR. Now the third release CHIMERA (cover above) uses the framework of the mythical fire breathing monster with a lion's head, a serpents tale and a goats body to explore more contempory issues.

"For centuries, mankind has been fascinated by composite creatures, from mythical monsters such as the Chimera and Griffin, up to the modern day when science and genetic engineering offer new possibilities for hybridisation," says editor Dave Goodman. "CHIMERA explores some of these ideas with a collection of short stories from a variety of creators." More info can be found on the website www.bahala-na.co.uk/zipgun. CHIMERA is A5, colour cover, 32 pages for £2.50 inc p+p.

Unfinished Victims

The Stockport based publisher of the CHIMERA ARTS line of horror comics, John Gallagher, is soon to expand beyond his two anthology titles USHER and BEDLAM to print a previously lost and unseen horror tale from 1972 in a prestige collectors limited edition.

"SAGA OF THE VICTIMS was an unfinished work from writer Al Hewittson of SKYWALD COMICS, a contempory of WARREN", says Gallagher. "After a search to find the copyright owners for SKYWALD properties, I was mistakenly informed of Hewittsons death. I instead managed to track down one of SKYWALD's other writers, Augustine Funnel, to discover it was actually in fact an artist who had died and not the writer!"

Eventually finding Hewittson alive and well, John received a selection of Hewittson's vintage work for inclusion in the anthologies. It was amongst this that Gallagher found five completed parts to THE SAGA OF THE VICTIMS, in which two female characters are subjected to ceaseless tortures, indignities and monstrosities as they apparently "learn the true meaning of horror!"

"Another search to find the original Spanish artist Sousa proved fruitless," John continues, "and I offered to have the pages restored by himself in the same style and to complete the final sixth part, as the writer's original notes were lost".

Now several months later, Gallagher is having the 120 page series digitally printed as a graphic novel in a limited collectors edition to be distributed through DIAMOND in 2004. The long project has proved a labour of love for the publisher: "I believe there's the market out there for quality horror stories like SAGA OF THE VICTIMS, and I'm glad I could rescue the series from any further damage over time so people can enjoy it as much as I do."

"Dulce et decorum est?"

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" - it is sweet and right to die for your country.

A Latin saying used at the outbreak of WW1, and what Wilfred Owen termed "the old lie". Now, with that quote, the creator of one of the longest running UK self-published comics, Jason Cobley, hints at big changes to come in his BULLDOG ADVENTURE MAGAZINE universe of Big Blighty and the Vegie Nation.

In the meantime BAM! #25 is out now and features the first part of an epic BULLDOG story, 'Vortex', where, 24-style, Bulldog is in a race against time to prevent a vegetable-destroying bomb from going off and wiping out the entire country. Political satire and all-out action-adventure with the odd laugh from writer Jason Cobley and artists Patrick O'Connor, Ed Traquino, Stephen Prestwood and Neill Cameron. Also in BAM #25 is part 4 of Garen Ewing's RAINBOW ORCHID, the debut of Jim Cameron's bizarre BOBBY BUCCANEER, and the continuation of MER-TROPOLIS, where Bulldog and Samurai Commander Keiko Panda take on an escaped war criminal in the utopian mermaid city of Mer-tropolis. BAM #26 will be out in October, featuring a PJ Holden cover, PJ's conclusion to 'Vortex': Send in the Clones, as well as more RO, BB, and the beginning of 'The Polar Sea', a story featuring Bulldog's grandfather on an expedition to a hidden sea at the North Pole.

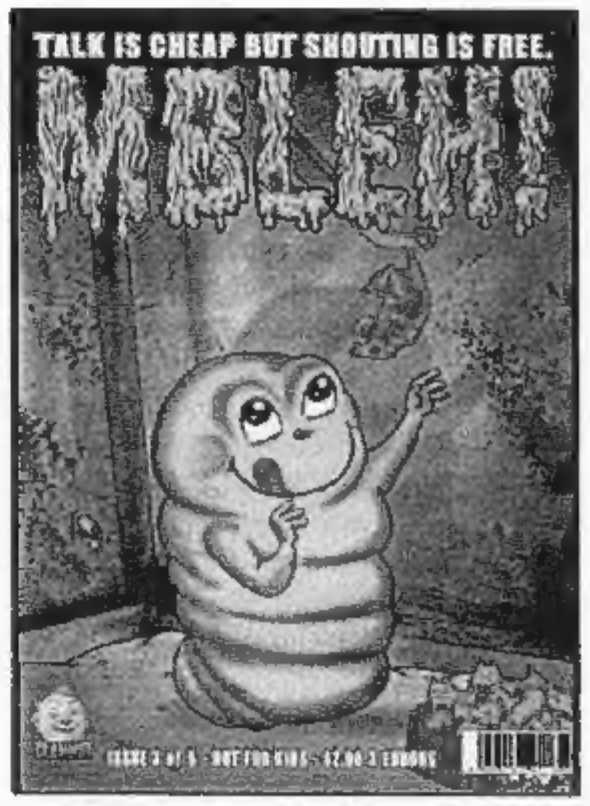
Said Jason on the future of BAM!: "Yes, on the site I've hinted at the death of a major character, which may take place in #27 or #28. Other than that, I'm saying nothing yet."

Getting Jiggy with it

Bob Byrne, editor Ireland based anthology MBLEH! planning a new oneshot provisionally called 'THE JIG IS UP', and is opening the doors for submissions. Says Bob: "I'm looking for 1 to 5 page stories with Ireland/Irishness as the theme. Be it a political rant, funny anecdotes, crazy 'lil stories or anything that you want to get off your chest about this silly little country. Keep in mind that ultimately we're aiming to sell this abroad so you can help dispel (or create new) misconceptions that foreigners may have."

Contributors are asked to bear in mind the submission requirements:

"Stories are to be B&W/Greyscale and will need to be roughly US comic page size. 258 x 168mm. Send stuff by post or email, if you need anything scanned or any help give me a shout. Short strip type comics are also welcome. "I'm also looking for a fancy full colour cover for it. Please remember that in order to secure worldwide distribution we'll need to make this as professional as possible so take your time and put the work in. The people at Diamond seem interested in it so it'd be a good opportunity for people to get their work seen." See www.clamnuts.com for more MBLEH! info.



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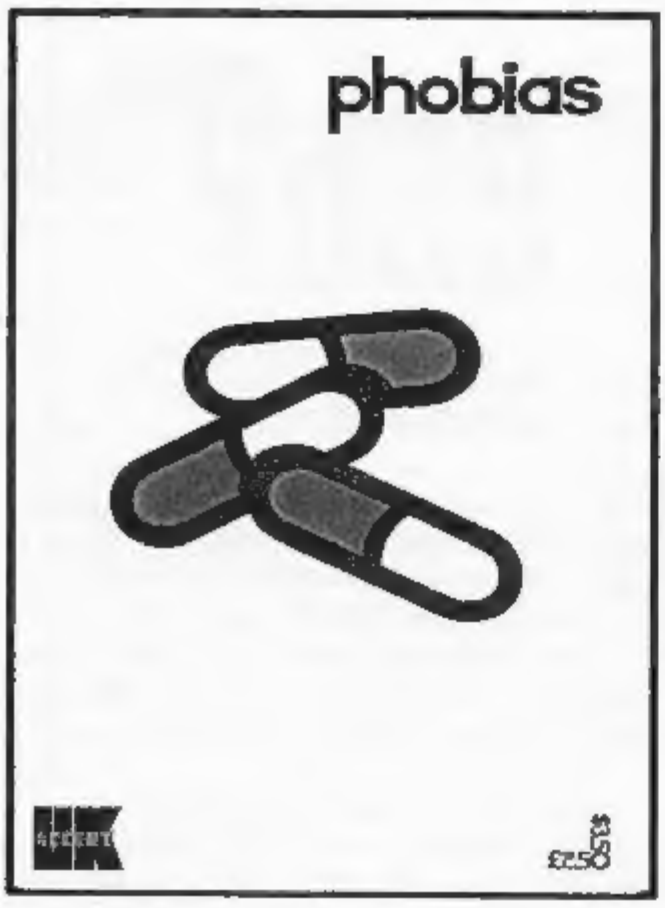


Accent UK Face their Fears with new anthology

Following the success of the first anthology from the ACCENT UK collective comes the second. Entitled PHOBIAS, the 40 page b/w US format comic contains all new work from the collectives members, including Dave (DEVA) West, Colin (M56) Mathieson, and Leon Hewitt, but also from guests Dave (SPRINGHEELED JACK) Hitchcock, Leonie (THERE GOES TOKYO) O'Moore and Chris (COMICS INTERNATIONAL) Bunting, as well as many more.

Each creator has taken one phobia from an estimated list of over five hundred documented fears. These range from the general, ie: spiders or blood to the more obscure and eccentric, like knees or peanut butter sticking to the roof of the mouth.

PHOBIAS, priced £2.50, will be available from Nov 1st 2003. Previews can be seen online at www.enginecomics.co.uk.

ACCENT UK has also helped organise a series of events to bolster creativity in local children. In BORDERS Stockport, one saturday a month will begin a cartoon workshop with local creators, after a similar event in July in the same store recieved much praise.

Later the same day will be a COFFEE & COMICS meet upstairs in STARBUCKS, where a specific area will be set aside for chatting, as well as the opportunity for discounts for attendees.

For more info on dates see www.bordersstore.co.uk

Soaring Penguin takes Flight

More than a change of name for popular thinking comics fan mag in store

COMICS FORUM, not to be confused with the American title of the same name, but the comics magazine produced previously in conjunction with the Comic Creators Guild, has had a revamp of late. The pair behind this, Will Morgan and John Anderson, are now going one step further in developing a stronger discussion magazine for comics. John explains this evolution and the plans for its future.

"In 2001, Howard Stangroom approached me to assist in the production of Comics Forum," says John. "Comics Forum had been in something of a doldrums, not having been seen for some 2 years, since issue 20 appeared in Winter 1999. Comic Forum 21 came out in time for the Comics Festival in Bristol where, I was told, it did reasonably well. Apparently, people remembered Comics Forum, and were pleased to see it again.

"Howard and I therefore set out to produce Comics Forum 22 for publication in October 2001. Due, however, to circumstances beyond our control, that issue didn't see print until March 2002! It was at that point that Howard and I decided that we needed further control of the title. We presented a proposal to the CCG to provide us with more autonomy over Comics Forum.

"Understandably, the CCG was reluctant to simply hand over ownership of the title without some recompense. Their argument was that Comics Forum had been around for close to 10 years, and that it had built up some caché. That, they felt, was worth something. I'm not about to get into the details of the negotiations; suffice it to say that we failed to reach an agreement."

This is just one reason why the name of the magazine changed, John explains; it is not, however, the major reason.

"During the months of negotiation, I had looked further at the nature of Comics Forum - the layout, the content, the distribution - and found that there was much that could be improved upon. In comparison with the many, many magazines on the shelves, Comics Forum looked, well, amateurish. It looked like a fanzine, and not a professional title that readers would turn to on a regular basis. This did a disservice to the content, which was an articulate, intelligent discourse on comics and the comics industry.

"I set about revitalising the look, making the magazine smaller and perfect bound, with more design elements inside. I also started commissioning comics artists to provide full-colour covers to each issue. We started being solicited in Previews. And we are now carried by a magazine distributor in Britain, providing us with further penetration into the UK market. These changes made Comics Forum more like the type of magazine that I wanted to produce. But it still wasn't enough.

"And here is the heart of why we changed the name to Comics Focus. We didn't. Comics Focus is not the same magazine as Comics Forum. Oh, certainly they are visually similar - I'm not about to dismiss the elements of Comics Forum that seemed to work! And while there will still be room for a celebration of those American comics characters and creators that we love so much, we will be turning our attention more to Britain and to Europe."

John indicates that under his SOARING PENGUIN imprint COMICS FOCUS will become a title to follow from its first issue in November (cover art by David Lloyd above): "We will be running regular

columns by Paul Gravett and Joss O'Kelly whose two titles, ***Invisible Art*** and ***Son of Invisible Art*** are important works in showing how graphic novels can help to combat illiteracy and be used for education. We will also have exclusive use of the transcripts from Ken Gale and Mercy Van Vlack's New York City radio show, ***'Nuff Said*** where they were able to interview some of the top creators in America. And we are improving and expanding our coverage of European comics, and more importantly British Comics, particularly the UK Small Press, of which Engine Comics will be, I suspect, a major player."

It looks like 2004 will see an explosion of quality from UK based creators on all fronts, and John and his team will be there every step of the way: "In a nutshell, Comics Forum was where we learned our craft. Comics Focus will be where we put it all together."

Mr Grope, I have no interest in the Wembley competition. Lord Lawrence has merely hired my assistant for an expedition to search for an orchid that may or may not exist.
You mean... you mean you don't actually have the orchid?
Lawrence is even more desperate than I thought! Well, well, heh! And all over a silly little sword I took a fancy to.
I understand ownership of that sword goes hand in hand with the Stone estate.
Oh, I'm sad to say that Lawrence is a terrible fabulist! He probably even told you that absurd story about the Crusade, and his grandfather at Kandahar. What spoofery!

Early November of this year will see the release of Book One of Garen Ewing's 'The Rainbow Orchid'.

The Collected Orchid

Acclaimed THE RAINBOW ORCHID: BOOK ONE to be released

It will include the first five episodes, all collected from Jason Cobley's Bulldog Adventure Magazine, where it has been serialised over the past year. The Rainbow Orchid is an adventure story set in a fictional 1920's time period, bringing together elements of H. Rider Haggard romantic-adventure, Jules Verne mystery, Edgar Rice Burroughs action, and European style comic art - in the tradition of Edgar P Jacobs and Hergé. The plot concerns the search in Asia for a lost and secret valley where the fabled Rainbow Orchid is said to grow, not to mention a bunch of devious crooks who will stop at nothing to see that it isn't found, or at the very least, our adventuring heroes should never return with it.

Of course the valley holds more secrets than merely the rumour of a sacred flower, and worse dangers than a henchman with a revolver...

Ewing states he created Rainbow Orchid not long after finishing his adaptation of The Tempest, and he felt the need to create a set of his own characters in a strong setting and with a solid story he could build up over several adventures. Asked on how it feels finishing Book One: "It could be seen as a miracle! The first 3 pages were actually completed in 1997, but then I fell out of being able to draw my own comic strips. I constructed the plot more in the following years, but when an opportunity came to have it serialised in BAM! I was delighted to get back to it - which seemed an impossibility at some times. It's been living in my head so strongly these past five years that it's lovely to get it out onto paper at last."

What does he have planned for later issues? "There's a lot to reveal and some rather un-expected things to happen - I can't bring myself to give anything away. Some of these questions may be answered... What is Urkaz Grope actually up to? Will Jules and Lily find the Rainbow Orchid? Does it even exist? What happened to William Pickle? Who the dickens is Mr Drubbin? Will Evelyn Crow and Box follow Julius Chancer to India? Who will win the Wembley Orchid competition? Er, and more... This adventure does have a a very definite end, and the story will keep moving forward at a pace to get there."

RAINBOW ORCHID BOOK 1 is priced £3.00 inc p+p. Order online from www.kingratpress.co.uk or by post, cheques to G C Ewing, 57A Heathcote Drive, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 1NB.

A 'PREVIEWS' For the Indie Scene hits shops nation wide

Long time veteran and champion of the UK small press scene, SMALLZONE's Shane Chebsey has gone one big step further in his efforts to get creators noticed by the 'mainstream'.

Four thousand copies of the glossy colour, A4 sized COMICS ADVERTISER have been distributed to shops across the country in what Shane describes as an attempt to "raise the awareness of these almost unknown talents and the wonderful stories they have to tell."

Shane is a familiar face at most conventions and marts, where his usually overflowing tables sport some of the most diverse comics imaginable. As well as his distribution network and website (www.smallzone.co.uk), he has also edited the CAOF anthology for several years.

As with all new ventures, especially in the indie scene, it's not been an easy start, however such response from the small press community has convinced Shane not to proceed past a second issue: "Self-publishers are a pessimistic bunch by nature, it's bred into us by all the money we spend on printing and advertising that we hardly ever get back." The long running CAOF and IMAGINEERS are both to be cancelled as well as Shane consolidates all three into a new title, INCOMING!, that will incorporate elements of all three.

Shane's determination could pay off for those who are willing to support him.

Email chebbo@aol.com for more details.

Lifting the veil on a 'perfect' society?

The International Manga Association has recently released an anthology that aims to dispell misconceptions about both West and East culture.

Says Xavier Gros, one of the contributors: "In Japan, the stereotyped image of a *Gaijin* (foreigner) being American, foolish, and incapable to either speak Japanese or understand Japanese society still prevails. *Visions of Japan* can be perceived as a critical eye on Japanese society, but without being a pamphlet against Japan or its citizens." *Visions of Japan* is the first in a series of publications from the IMA, a registered non-profit association that aims to promote comics/manga about Japan and also to publish in either French or English languages, artists from Japan, (non mainstream artists which are not known in Europe). "So basically we are a bunch of friends from Europe and Japan and try to put together a comic, and are currently working on a samurai story," says Xavier. "The fact that we are non-profit means that whatever money we obtain from the sales of our books is used to produced new books and so on. Overall, Visions is satirical and humorous. It is hoped that this book will provide readers with an insight into Japan, reveal and lift the veil on a 'perfect' country, but most of all that it will entertain and distract."

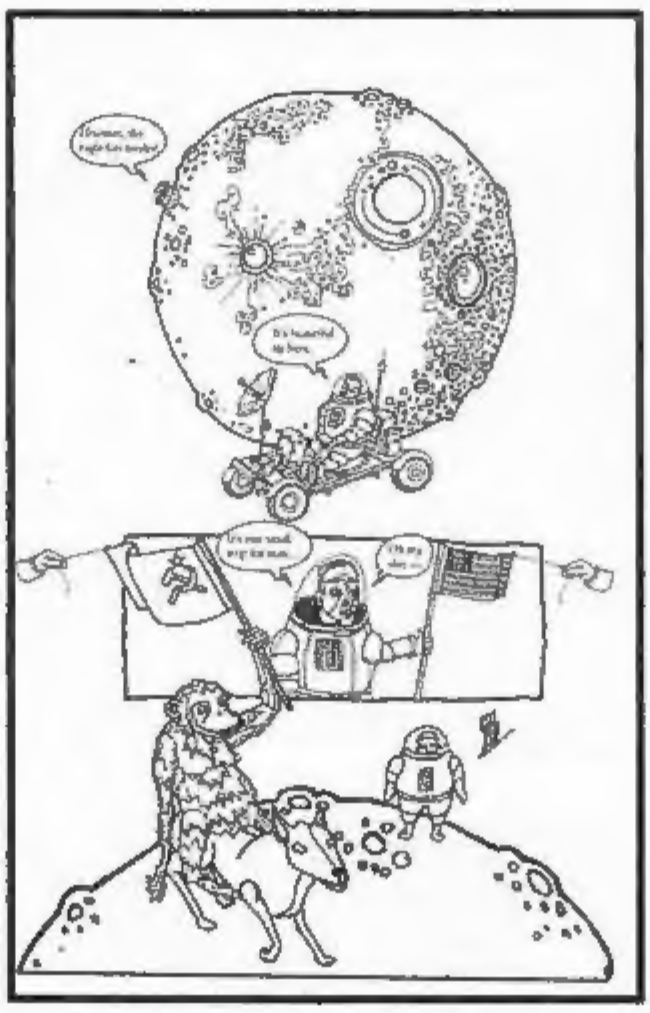
VISIONS OF JAPAN, by X. Gros, A. Koga, C. Nagatani, (sample art left) can be ordered from imangaa@yahoo.co.uk, priced £10.

Nice One, Two and Three

Nice is an anthology comic from London featuring an ever-growing mass of talented artists. Founded in 2002 the comic has already spawned spin-offs and side projects. It's available in various shops in London and from the official website: www.ukseen.com/nice.

A major contributor to the anthology, Herc, explains how the anthology came about: "When I was pushing a comic of mine called ME-GOD around London's comic shops a few years ago I met some nice people in 'Gosh!'. Some had also put out small press comics and some others wanted to. A year or so later we decided we was gonna take over this small press comics shit and start to run tings with a proper premium-special quality anthology comic that was actually gonna come out quite frequently. We published NICE issue 1 (art right) earlier this year and predictably followed it up with issues 2 and 3 respectively. We are now working on no.4 and our ranks are swelling. Some people say NICE is exactly what it says on the front cover so no other London comic try and step on our toes dem."

Herc is proving to be a prolific creator in his own right with several minicomics now produced. "I've just finished WRECKSHOW 1, a new A5, 32 page comic by me which is a limited edition of 120 copies. Available very soon, like next week maybe. Other comics i'm working on at the moment are: DESERT ZOMBIES: A6 minicomi; CLASSY: a study of the british class system, A6 comic; SUPER ROLEKZ: rap n' graffiti ish A6 handmade jobby; MECHANICALLY RECOVERED BUSHMEAT: part3, A6 minicomic. All these will be available from Grandiosa by the end of this year or there abouts, and for 2004 a collaborative 'jam' type of comic with one continuos story called POLENATE."



Tri-lingual 'Totems' planned For 2005 release

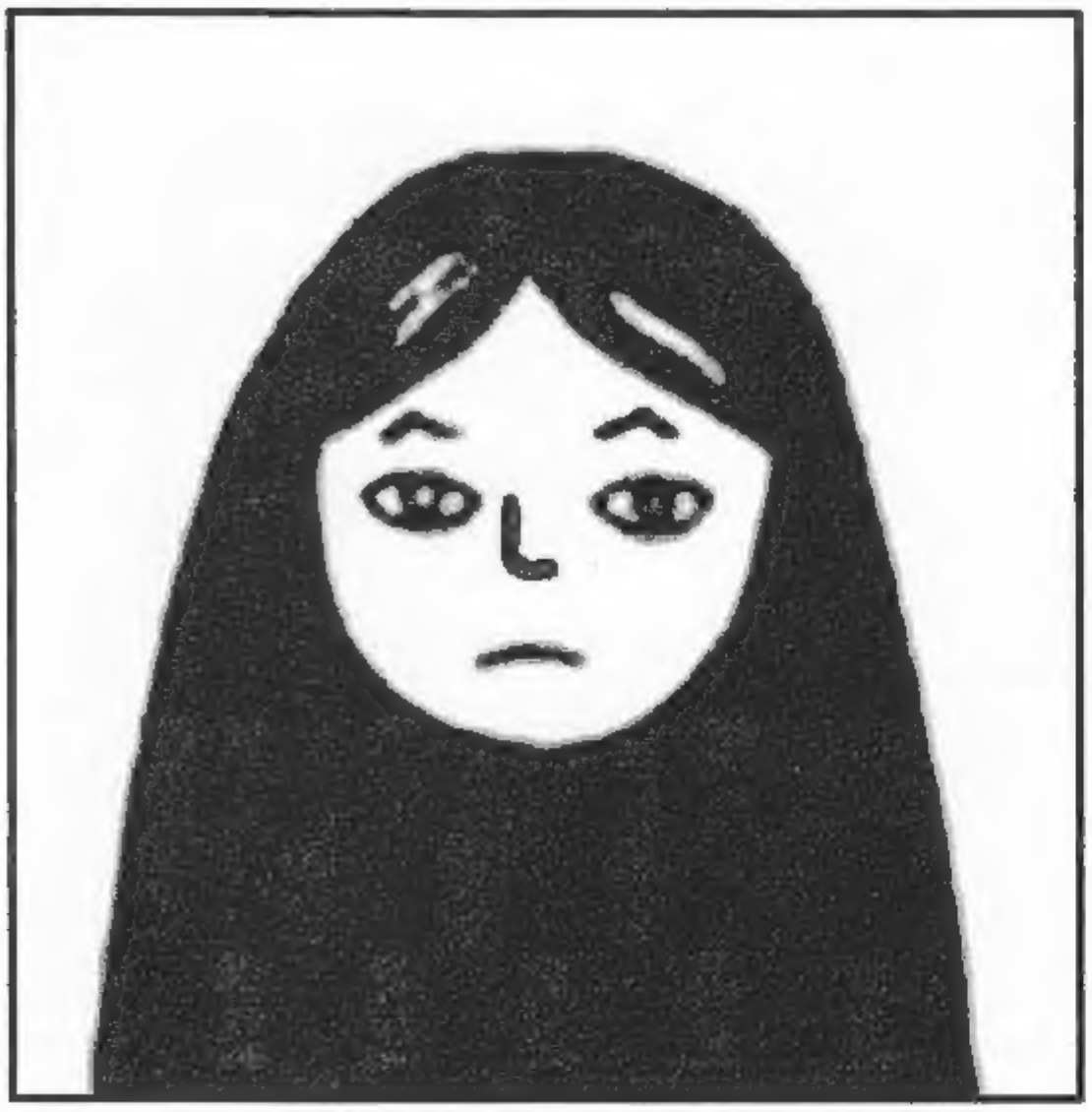
The team behind the ACCENT UK anthologies REMEMBRANCE DAYS and PHOBIAS are developing a breakthrough comic for release in 2005.

The US format 3 issue mini, aimed at 8-15 year olds, will follow five multi-ethnic kids from an inner city school and their adventures through time and space. They discover each has their own powers and insight when activated by a mystical 'totem'. These totems are given away free in cereal boxes and become the latest craze, but only they, the chosen five, can access the skyship that floats out of time, and can control the mythical beasts that their totem corresponds to in the past.

"The mini has been created not only to appeal to the BEYBLADE/POKEMON generation, and influenced by the great cartoons and toy fads of our youth, as well as the best of modern day computer games and films," says creator and writer Barry Renshaw. "We wanted to mix in genuine history and mythology with a manga sensibility that would prove both educational and entertaining to the age group we're aiming at, the same age group that comics needs to aim at if they want to survive as a medium."

TOTEMS will also prove groundbreaking as its creators hope to have it available in three languages: English, Cantonese and Bengali, to reflect not only the origins and culture of the characters but also to appeal to a wider audience.

TOTEMS is currently being developed by the core ACCENT UK team and will be looking for an artist in 2004.



The Spirit of Angoulême

Steven Betts report on Europes biggest comic's festival, and what we can learn from the French.

FESTIVAL REPORT ON ANGOULEME:
BY STEPHEN BETTS

The Angouleme Festival , France, Jan 2003

The Festival International de la Bande Dessinée - The Angouleme Festival - celebrated its 30th birthday in January this year. It is the foremost international comics festival in the world, and the largest festival outside of Japan. As befits its anniversary year, the festival was wildly successful, with a quarter of a million people visiting the town over just four days.

In honour of the Festival's anniversary the town renamed Rue Marengo, one of its busiest shopping streets, to Rue Hergé, after the Belgian author of Tintin. This demonstrates that comics mean more to Angouleme than just the festival; as comics historian Paul Gravett puts it "Angouleme is not just the Cannes of comics, it's the Mecca of comics".

This may sound like hyperbole, but it's not; for a comics enthusiast, visiting Angouleme for the first time is an overwhelming experience. Dotted all over the town are murals of famous French cartoon characters; it has one of the very few undergraduate courses in creating comics; even the typical French white oval street signs are augmented with little tails, turning them into speech bubbles.

Angouleme also boasts the Centre National de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image - the CNBDI - one of the finest and largest comics museums and libraries, opened 10 years ago. Where Hollywood Boulevard has hand-prints of film-stars outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, the CNBDI immortalizes its stars with images from their comics set in cement in front of its glittering glass and aluminium edifice.

The Festival takes over the town in a way which is almost unimaginable until you've seen it. Days before the festival starts the whole town - already suffused with comics imagery - is oozing comics. Exhibitions big and small are being erected, journalists are traipsing through L'Espace Franquin to pick up their press packs and begin their networking, and almost all of the shops are displaying comics in their windows.

The streets really begin to bustle as the Festival properly gets underway. On the Thursday children from all over the Charente region are bussed in, swarming around anyone with a pen in their hand, endearingly and enthusiastically trying to get a drawing. By the weekend the crowds swell even further, and you risk any of the big attractions on Saturday at your peril.

The sheer diversity of material on display is just one of the fantastic things about the festival. From the pyrotechnics of Soleil, to the mannered European stylings of Schuiten - this year's president - to the iconoclastic humour of Winschluss' Monsieur Ferraille exhibit and the anarchic grotesquery of the Underboom and La Demiere Crie, the festival almost certainly has something to satisfy your tastes.

All the big publishers are in the two huge tents in *Place du Champ de Mars*, where long queues of people wait in line for artists to patiently draw dedications in their books. The South tent houses the more mainstream publishers and is usually the most overcrowded place in town, but it's the North tent where most of the more avant-garde material is to be found.

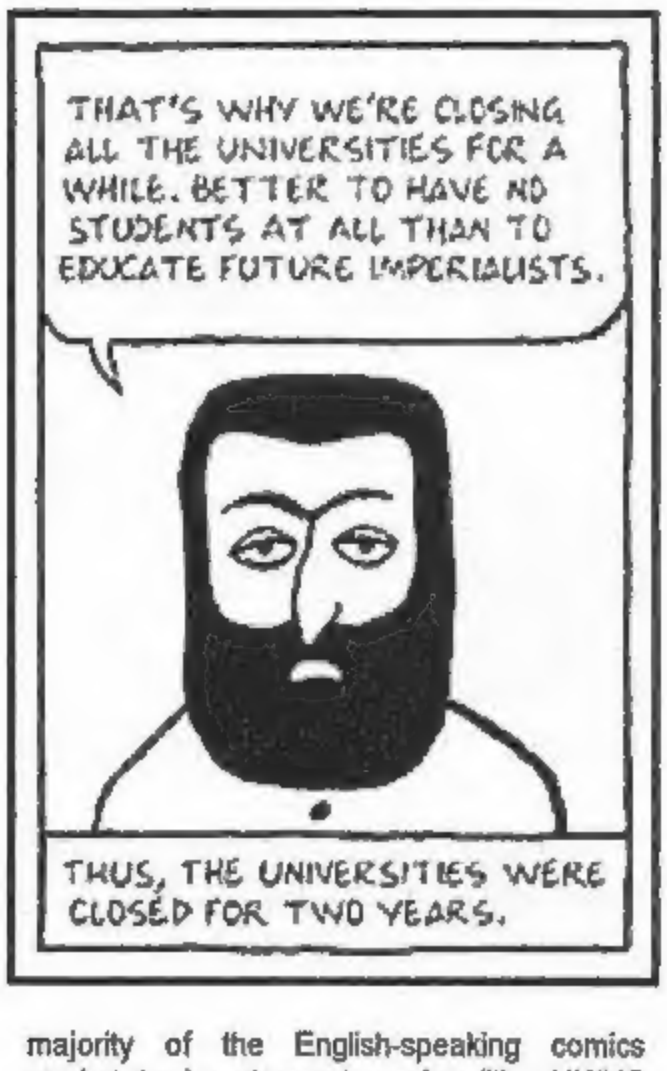
Swiss publishers Drozophile are regulars there, with their beautiful, oversized, silk-screened anthologies, with production values of which even Chris Ware would approve. Freon and Amok - recently merged to form Fremok - display their fine-art sensibilities with a stall displaying some of the most beautiful comics I've ever seen. And it is also where to find, L'Association, who occupy a large part of the back wall, showing off their huge repertoire.

The meteoric success of L'Association - from a small collective of cartoonists with a shared vision of creative freedom, into one of the most successful and critically acclaimed publishers in France - can be charted by their rise in profile at Angouleme. They formed in 1990, and spent their first four years in the *Bulle de New York*, the tent where the small press and fanzines are based. They then moved to the South tent, where they were stuck for the next three years next to Soleil - not a particularly happy experience (Soleil are effectively the Image - albeit more successful - of French comics, and regularly have audience-grabbing sound and light shows). Finally L'Asso moved to the North tent, where they have been for the last six years.

They are now one of the most important publishers in France, and are regularly nominated for *L'Alph-Arts*, the Oscars of comics which are awarded at Angouleme. Last year Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis won the most coveted prize of *Meilleur Album*, and this year Killoffer was nominated for the same award for his extraordinary book "676 Apparitions de Killoffer", losing out to Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan. The publisher of L'Association, Jean-Claude Menu, downplays the importance of the awards, but says that the festival itself gives France as a whole the opportunity to talk about comics; every year on the first day of the festival Liberation, the left-wing national daily newspaper, publishes an edition with all illustrations (ALL illustrations - including the adverts) drawn by comics artists.

Also to be found in the North tent are Knockabout comics, a British publishing and distribution company. Publisher, Tony Bennett, has been coming to the festival for the last two decades and loves the diversity of the audience, observing with a touch of incredulity "the ages range from 3 to 83, and half of them are women", a demographic which would surely bemuse most British or American festival organizers.

He finds that the knowledgeable audience enables him to sell more of the comics that he personally likes: "it allows us to bring a selection of stuff that doesn't sell so well in England; things that we consider to be high quality and useful to the future of comics". In contrast, Bennett finds the


THAT'S WHY WE'RE CLOSING ALL THE UNIVERSITIES FOR A WHILE. BETTER TO HAVE NO STUDENTS AT ALL THAN TO EDUCATE FUTURE IMPERIALISTS.
THUS, THE UNIVERSITIES WERE CLOSED FOR TWO YEARS.

majority of the English-speaking comics market to be stagnant, saying "the UK/US market is homogenous - people will carry on just trying to produce movie properties".

Paul Gravett thinks that the UK and US markets should learn from the French. "There's a lack of understanding of what is really here" he says, citing the fact that France's best selling strip last year was Zep, a hardcover collection of a children's comic: "If Asterix - a strip set in ancient Gaul - can work, there's no reason why this shouldn't find an audience in the UK".

He also mentioned that comics is the one sector of publishing in France that has continued to grow for the last seven years, due, at least in part, to the vibrant scene invigorated by new and innovative publishers. He thinks the mainstream publishers are missing a trick here, and that in turn is disadvantaging British comics creators: "Large publishers offer better chances for creators, given their better promotion, marketing and distribution".

This was Gravett's 19th year at Angouleme. He said one of the largest changes in that time is that the festival has now become truly international. Whilst much of the official business of the Festival is obviously dominated by the French (Schuiten, a Belgian, was only the fourth non-French president of the festival) the fact that the most prestigious *Alph-Art* was won this year by Ware (albeit for the Delcourt-published French edition of Jimmy Corrigan) shows an awareness and acceptance of foreign work.

This year's guest nation was Korea, with a large exhibition showing an incredibly diverse range of material illustrating traditional techniques alongside bleeding-edge technology; they even had an array of mobile phones displaying the comics that Koreans download to their handsets (although I would decline to argue whether these are actually "comics").

But it is really in the cartoonists and publishers that attend the festival that the truly international nature of the festival comes out. Publishers, distributers and creators come from all over continental Europe and beyond. The excellent Israeli cartoonist collective, Actus Tragicus, were unfortunately absent this year, but alumni of the comics course taught by them did have a stall in the *Bulle de New York* (showing, incidentally, that they'd learnt from their teachers extremely well).

However, it is hard not to think that the British are perennially under-represented at Angouleme, although things do seem to be improving somewhat. Amongst those in the vanguard of Brits trying to make their mark on Angouleme are a bunch of cartoonists involved in a new British anthology called Sentence. I spoke to two of the contributors who went to the festival, Nick Abadzis and Gary Northfield, about their experiences.

"I had no preconception and was really really blown away" says Northfield "comics have taken over this whole town; every nook, every cranny". Abadzis has been to the festival several times now, but still feels that exhilaration.

"The most extraordinary thing about it" he says "is when you see that huge cross-section of the French public storming the town and enthusiastically buying up comics."

I asked Abadzis why there should be this massive difference in cultures between our two countries. He thinks it is a fundamental difference between the cultures. "Britain is much more of a literary based culture, and anything visual is seen as kid's stuff after a point, in Europe they seem to want to feed their visual imaginations as well as their literary imaginations."

Nonetheless, the comics scene in Britain does seem to be enjoying something of a renaissance - Chris Ware winning the Guardian's first novel award, the fantastic success of ComICA, not to mention the emergence of quality anthologies such as Sturgeon White Moss, edited by Sylvia Farago, and, of course, Sentence.

"In a way," says Abadzis, "Angouleme invited the British as the guest country in the wrong year [Britain was the guest in 1991] - they should do it now, and invite a lot of these new young cartoonists who'd gain so much more from it." Northfield agrees: "it would open their eyes and show them what is possible. It's such a cauldron of ideas, you want to find different ways of expressing yourself." Abadzis reiterates the energizing effect of the Festival, describing it as "culturally explosive"; he goes further, almost throwing out a challenge: "it's necessary to go to at least one Angouleme in your life if you're a working cartoonist".

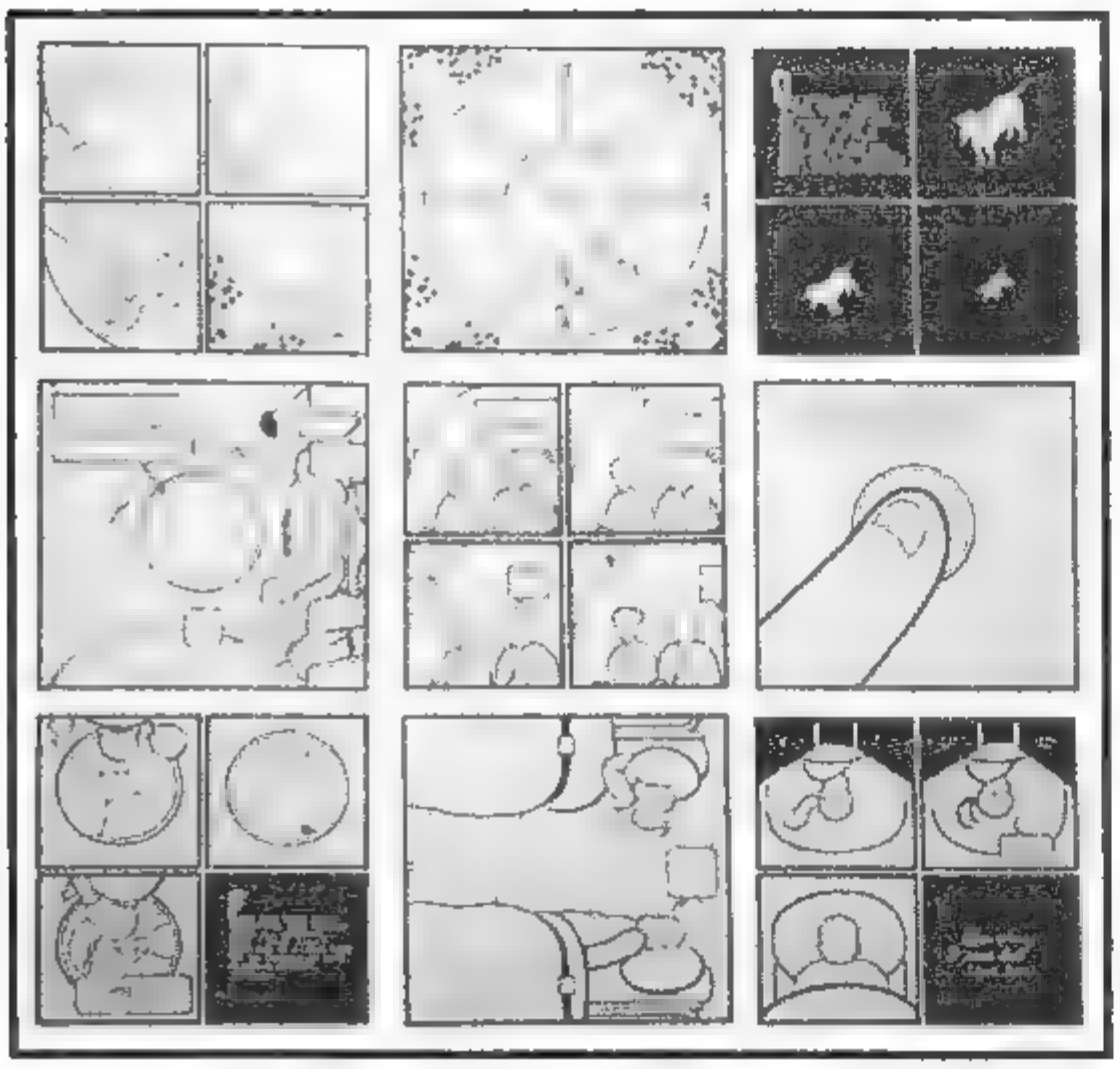
Clearly - evinced by the number of cartoonists in this country relying on non-comics projects to pay the rent - financial constraints play a part in the under-representation of British comics at Angouleme. Unfortunately we have little financial support available to cartoonists here. French publishers are able to borrow loans in order to finance production of their books; the fund from which these loans are drawn - *Le Centre National de Livre* - is generated by a tax on all books, and is used even by the large established publishers. Even the free-market utopia of the US has the Xeric grant for young cartoonists.

Another obvious - and often mentioned - problem is the language barrier, although there now seems to be an upsurge of quality comics being translated into English, Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis (art left and prev page) and David B.'s Epileptic, both from L'Association, being obvious examples. Abadzis would like to see this working in the opposite direction as well: "One of the French editors asked me why so much British talent goes to America: 'there is a common sensibility amongst this current wave of cartoonists [and French comics]; they could come to us and do something that was a bit more open to their muses'". Abadzis would like to see the publication of multiple versions of a comic in different languages: "doing co-editions basically brings down the price of printing comics. You're automatically throwing the gates open to a wider audience across Europe."

Sentence got around the language barrier very neatly by only allowing one sentence per strip (hence the name), which was translated in multiple languages once at the opening page of each strip. Despite this innovative approach, Sentence still didn't sell as well it might have done at the festival. "You gotta have a presence, or there's no way to make any kind of impact, which we didn't", explains Northfield. Although obviously extremely grateful to Knockabout for giving them the opportunity of bringing their book to the festival, Northfield says they're aiming to have their own stall in the *Bulle de New York* next year.

This would be a welcome raising of Britain's profile at the Festival, especially as it would showcase the new generation of young cartoonists to a wide and knowledgeable audience. With Abadzis and Northfield describing the genesis of Sentence as a bunch of like-minded cartoonists getting together in order to do the comics that they wanted to do, it is almost too tempting to see parallels with the fledgling beginnings of L'Association.

"It's necessary to go to at least one Angouleme in your life if you're a working cartoonist".



The United States of ComICA

PAUL GRAVETT, curator of this years maiden comICA festival in London reports on it's multimedia successes and plans for the future.

FESTIVAL REPORT ON COMICA:
BY PAUL GRAVETT

A Festival of Comic Art & Literature at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, June 26th to July 6th 2003.

It has been several years now since London had its own comics festival and this summer the prestigious arts venue, the ICA, down the road from Buckingham Palace, devoted ten days and almost all of its various departments (Talks, Exhibitions, Digital Studio, Performance, Club Nights, Film) to COMICA.

This is a new kind of festival of comics, deliberately not aimed mainly at diehard fans nor at all the family, but at an adult, non-specialist, culturally aware public. COMICA is inspired more by the European attitude towards the medium, from Angoutême in France to Fumetto in Lucerne, Switzerland. COMICA also marked the 20th anniversary of the ESCAPE magazine, which I co-editor

The headline international guests from the US were Charles Burns, Joe Sacco and Chris Ware (artwork above), whose presence was made possible by the generous help of Ana Merino and the Semana Negra Festival in Spain, and by the British publishers Jonathan Cape. They were joined by Sophie Crumb from Paris and Frédéric Boilet from Tokyo, supported by the French Institute and bu Boilet's publishers, Ponent and Fanfare.

For nearly two hours, Charles Burns showed a huge range of his work in comics and illustration in conversation with TV and radio presenter and comics aficionado Jonathan Ross. Alex Garland, author of The Beach, was almost as shy and nervous as Chris Ware, who ran through a slideshow of his comics, techniques and influences. Political cartoonist Martin Rowson introduced Joe Sacco with special emphasis on his graphic novel Palestine, tying in with the ICA's Palestinian film season. There were capacity crowds for all three talks. Sophie Crumb showed round her sketchbooks and French fanzine Keskya? and, in a first at the ICA, tattooed a willing victim's shoulder live on stage with her cartoon character Zaza. In a bilingual presentation, Fréderic Boilet explained his themes and methods that led to his 'nouvelle manga' graphic novel 'Yukiko's Spinach', launched in English at the festival.

In addition, there was a programme of talks on the first Sunday: a discussion of self-publishing, online v. offline, with creators Sam Chivers, Paul Fryer, Tom Gauld, Lorna Miller and Barry Renshaw; a Vertigo 10th anniversary focus with writers Warren Ellis and Mike Carey; the London launch of Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman with his collaborators Melinda Gebbie, Peter Hogan, Garry Leach and David Lloyd and the book's co-editor and strip biographer Gary Spencer-Millidge; and an Escape reunion, with Woodrow Phoenix previewing his storyboards for his animated version of Pants Ant, Ed Pinsent revealing his return to drawing comics, John Bagnall launching his first book collection, Don't Tread On My Rosaries (www.kinglycomics.com) and Chris Reynolds premiering his 25-minute live-action Mauretania movie, Hunters of the Sun.

Aside from talks, there were two exhibitions in the Concourse Gallery. Les Coleman and I co-curated FOO ZAP YOW & NOW, a survey of North American underground and alternative comics. Five display cases were filled with key representative comics to trace the developments over the past forty years accompanied by framed prints by R. Crumb, Mark Beyer, Joe Coelman, Julie Doucet and Chris Ware. A free 16-page catalogue was produced, containing an essay by Les Coleman, quotes from 18 artists and a complete listing of the exhibits.

On the opposite wall, Tom Gauld co-ordinated a team of artists from Test Tube Comics, Les Cartoonistes Dangereux and guests including Chris Ware, who collaborated on a wall-sized, multi-pathed narrative. This was intended not for publication, but specifically for the gallery site and for an internet version, as the first British project inspired by OuBaPo, the French 'workshop for the potential of comics'. For details of the online version, visit http://www.e-merl.com/pocom.htm.

In the ICA's Digital Studio, visitors could sample from a selection of some of the most exciting examples of webcomics and hypercomics chosen by guest curator Daniel Merlin Goodbrey. In his lecture, he also converted many skeptics to the blossoming arena of comics on the internet. On the Performance front, comic artists Woodrow Phoenix, John Bagnall and Marc Baines deejayed the packed opening night party, accompanied by a 40-minute moving image loop based on all of the guests' comics crafted by video-terrorists Exceeda. American outsider musician and artist Daniel Johnston performed in the theatre appropriately for an alternative Independence Day concert on July 4th, followed by a party hosted by Everett True and Careless Talk magazine. Meanwhile, anime dominated the film department with the UK release of Cowboy Bebop and a 'secret screening' of the Oscar-winning Spirited Away.

The response to Comica has been hugely positive. Major editorial coverage in newspapers and magazines from The Observer to Vogue, a 5-minute interview with Joe Sacco on Channel 4 News, sold-out talks and events, brisk sales of graphic novels from the ICA Bookshop and strong support from a broad public, from experts and critics who travelled from France, Belgium, Germany, Brazil, Canada and Sweden, and from celebrity comics readers, including comedian Frank Skinner and novelist Zadie Smith.

Plans are now afoot, not only for a bigger, better COMICA in summer 2004 curated again by myself, but before that for an ongoing programme of COMICA mini-events at the ICA in the months ahead. To be confirmed are an evening with Stephen Appleby, Tom Gauld and Simone Lia to launch their new books and an 'in conversation' with Art Spiegelman and Philip Pullman. For details visit www.ica.org.uk.

-Paul Gravett

Raptures of Raptus

Kev F Sutherlands report on Norways' family friendly festival.

FESTIVAL REPORT ON RAPTUS:
BY KEV F SUTHERLAND

Raptus Comic Festival, Bergen, Norway Sept 11 - 14 2003

It was my absolute pleasure and great privilege to be invited as a guest to Bergen's Raptus Comics Festival this past weekend

Unlike being invited to the festival I run (in Bristol every May, and now beginning a London event in November), this invitation involved my flights and hotels and even all my food being paid for, with even someone to pick me up from the airport. These favours were extended not only to me, but to handful of fellow British comic creators (Pat Mills, Dave Windett, Mike Collins, Lew Stringer, Carl Critchlow, Barrie Mitchell, John Freeman, John Armstrong and John Cooper), a handful of recognisable international guests, the most famous of whom were Will Eisner, Rodney Ramos and Carlos Ezquerra, and innumerable Norwegian and international guests of whom I had never heard (and some I had - Lise of Nemi fame, [art above] and Tomas of Rex Rudi - and some more I got to know).

The reason such generosity is possible by a festival which is attended by, as far as I could guage, the same number of visitors as my own, is simple. The city of Bergen supports comic art, and the people of Norway read comics. The city now supports the Raptus festival to the tune of approximately £20,000 a year, and their support doesn't end there

As I discovered, the Norwegian arts body actually subsidises comic strips. In order that newspapers can run Norwegian strips, rather then cheaper syndicated US strips, they have been match-funding for some years now, with a committee meeting regularly to decide which new creators and strips should get a break.

This funding also extends to assisting with the production of albums and graphic novels, all of which means Norwegian comic creators don't have to rely solely on the free market and have been supported in their building of a popular audience.

The most successful products of this arrangement have been Nemi, which now runs in London's Metro, and whose monthly anthology magazine sells 70,000 copies (in Norwegian, in a country of 5 million people, making it equal in popularity to a Brit comic selling 700,000 a month), and Pondus, a newspaper strip with its own anthology, which looks like a hybrid of Sergio Aragones and Viz but whose content I've not yet been able to judge since I've yet to see any of it translated into English.

The newspapers covered the Raptus festival daily - my own photograph appeared prominently in Saturday's coverage - and their reviews and interviews with comic creators, both domestic and international, are given equal or greater prominence than their coverage of other literature.

Bergen's news stands are also stiff with comics. Certainly there are as many comic books on the stands as there are TV listing and celebrity lifestyle mags, and they have equal prominence. A typical high street shop features a separate rack of Disney titles, four Marvel titles (all in Norwegian, obviously), and ten or twenty glossy comic mags, average price 4 quid, including, Nemi, Pondus, The Phantom (inexplicably earth's most boring newspaper strip retains incredible popularity in Norway), Lew Stringer's Suburban Satanist (in Swedish in fact), Conan (apparently as many women buy him as men) and a host more.

There is a preponderance of humour styles, with many more cartoony books than action art on the newsagent shelves. However in the town's comic shop Avalon, which looks like a Forbidden Planet store without the toys and cards, there's a full range of US titles on import, as well as French and other european mags and books, both in translation and in the original language, and a few treats such as Dan Abnett and Mark Harrison's Durham Red, and Pat Mills and Simon Bisley's Slaine, all in Norwegian.

As for the Festival itself, it was with some cheeky amusement that I saw how problems and unpredictabilities beset other festival organisers, just as badly as they do me.

Arild and Frode have a team including three or four more main committee members, supported by the middle-ranking Red Shirts who supposedly know the answers to all your questions, and a vast horde of Yellow Shirts, all volunteers, who were on hand to do all gofering and assisting. And still I found everyone at the top of this chain running around like a blue-arsed fly in precisely the way I do in Bristol.

The programme of events had three items running at all times. The 500 seater main talks room was packed to the gunnels for such events as the Nemi panel, Rex Rudi's live performance (did I mention they're a rockabilly band with their own strip?), and the Awards (presented by the Mayor Of Bergen), and no doubt the many others which I couldn't attend. I doubt Will Eisner played to any empty seats.

The 200 seater secondary talk room was less full whenever I attended it, for talks by Pat Mills and Lew Stringer, but there was never less than 50 in attendance and the AV facilities were superb. The omnipresent Document Camera, which every talk and class used, is a great aid to presentations, enabling art to be laid down flat and projected 15 feet high behind you. I've already hired one for London's Comic Festival on Nov 1st.

The art classes are a very big part of the Raptus programme. Indeed, they were the main reason I was there, having been flown over two weeks earlier to run three days of intensive classes, I returned to present all my pupils with their published version of what we'd produced, their diplomas for completing my 'course', and to run another brief session

The other Brit artists all had to run art demonstrations, and it wouldn't be unfair to say some felt themselves a bit out of their depth, the kids in the audience being silent and question-less most of the time, making it hard to measure what they were taking in.

"...If there are any comic creators who have bands in the UK, I want you to play for us."

Barrie Mitchell taught football art, John Cooper taught war comic art, Dave Windett taught Looney Toon-y cartooning, and John Armstrong taught romance and girls comic art.

The choice of Brit guests was intriguing to me, with a lot of emphasis on older artists from Brit comics' heydays of the 60s and 70s, when I would have thought a greater number of the public would have responded to meeting artists (all of whom would come at the drop of a hat) from current Marvel, DC and Brit-comic titles. They have full access to my address book, and I've made some suggestions of guests already.

On which subject, you can't get 2000AD over there, they'd vaguely heard of Viz, and the Dandy & Beano were viewed with curiosity and admiration, but as perhaps too juvenile. (2000AD were supposed to have sent over enough comics so that we could give them out to attendees. My bet is they arrive tomorrow.)

The dealer and exhibition space at Raptus was minimal compared to Bristol, or even London. A few dealers had old Norwegian comics and translations, the pride of my pile to take home being a 1956 edition of Hauk, the translation of the Eagle. There is no original art market in Norway, so the Brit artists invented one for them, selling their pages at an average of 50 quid each.

Events that I'd like to emulate included the costume parade - this was a real parade, through the streets of Bergen, in real costumes (I was Batman), with half a dozen adults and three classes of kindergarten kids (there would have been more had it been run on Saturday instead of Friday, however this served its purpose of getting the photos into Saturday morning's papers) - and the music. Rex Rudi played at Friday's party and after Saturday's awards, and if there are any comic creators who have bands in the UK, I want you to play for us.

The highlights for me were meeting and dining with Will and Ann Eisner, and on the Saturday night being given the chance to propose the toast to him (a rare moment - Kev F gave a serious speech).

Will is a great entertainer, and held court on Saturday morning at an event called Shop Talk, which was a round table discussion for comic professionals only, ie no public. I don't think such an event would work at the UK festivals, since this is what we do in the bar anyway, and I don't think I'm ready for events that exclude the comic-reading public (we have the media to do that for us)

Other personal highpoints were DJ-ing on Saturday, partying with Lise and the Rex Rudi guys till dawn on Friday, and feeling able to help out whenever I was needed, with talks and art classes. I have come home feeling as exhausted as if I'd been running the show myself.

So congratulations and thanks again to Arild, Frode and all the team, and to all the new friends I've made and colleagues I got to meet.

If they'll have me back, I'd go again with pleasure. Thought I'm more than happy to suggest some far more interesting guests than me.

(This report was originally posted to the COMICS 2000 mailing list)

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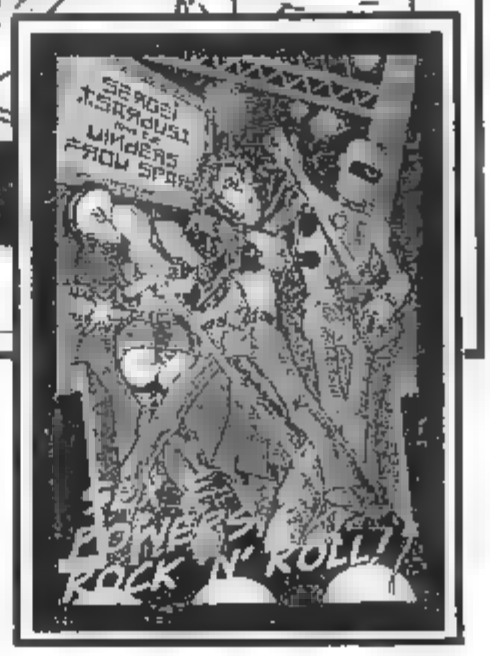

underfire COMICS

ROCK 'N' ROLL FRENZY!

Rapid Fire, the self proclaimed life after death of British Comics, presents its first special edition in this Rock 'N Roll themed anthology.

Cosmo White and Morris Banham, the team behind OPERATION: BLACK JET, unveil their latest creation – the meta powered glam punk outfit the *Minders From Spar*!

Rapid Fire regulars Duncan Salisbury and James Mitchell reveal the horrific secret behind the *Chart Factory* in their own twisted style.

The writer of TALISMAN and DREAM TIME Colin J Dinnie joins forces with Rapid Fire new comer Marcus Owens to tell the story of *Bandwidth* – the galaxy's last proper band (interior art left)
Plus more music related madness!

The UNDERFIRE crew will be at November's COMICS WINTER FESTIVAL. Will you? See more details on the official website.
www.underfire-comics com

RAPID FIRE WINTER SPECIAL:
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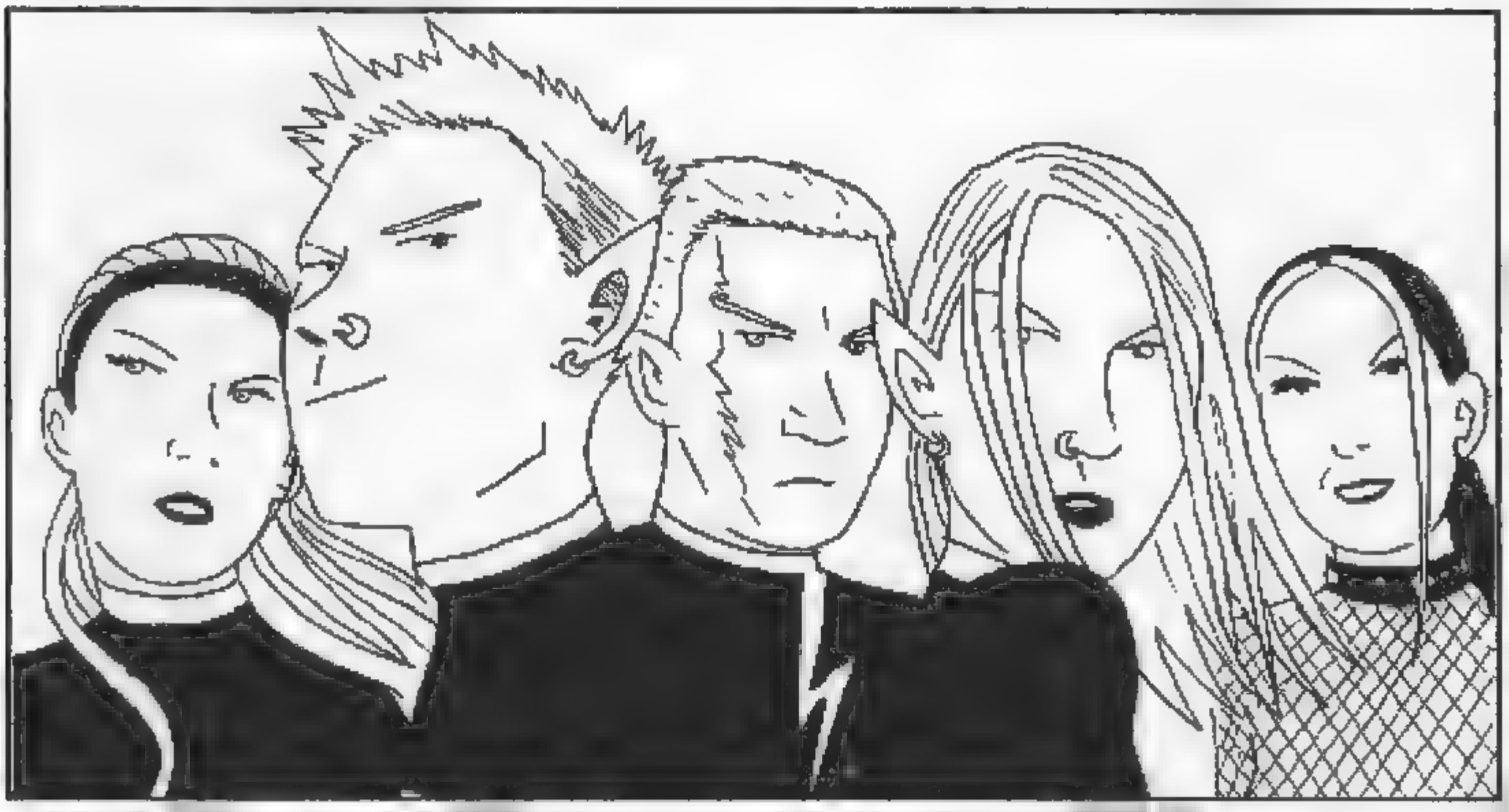


Vicious Circles

GARY SIMPSON speaks to THE O-MEN creator MARTIN EDEN

For those of you not already in the know (and if your interest in the small press is sufficiently piqued to pick this publication up, there can't be many), The O Men is the most important superhero comic being published in this country today.

Not bad, considering it's a small press title (whatever that means). The O Men is the book that proves that just because your print run is restricted and you don't have the backing of a major multinational, that doesn't mean you can't produce a world-class comic book. The O Men sets the standard.

Martin Eden has been writing, drawing, lettering and publishing his creation for the last four years. So far he's managed nineteen issues (eighteen regulars and an issue '0'), and has accrued something like 500 pages. And there's another thirty issues to come.

So what's it about? Essentially, it's a superhuman soap opera. We follow a large and well-defined cast of British superheroes living their everyday lives and coming together to combat threats to liberty, sanity, their relationships and their very existences. It's Zenith on an epic scale – but with the familiar, colloquial observations of a Tarantino movie. It's Vertigo and Eastenders. Imagine if the JLA was staffed by your friends, family and the people you recognise from down the street.

It's also intricately plotted, original, vast (but at the same time filled with small, intimate moments) and clever. It's a comic *about* superhero comics, and about the culture in which they flourish. It's also a bloody good read, filled with cool characters, cool dialogue, plenty of intrigue and action, and more sexy broads than you can shake a stick at. But don't take my word for it. Take it away, Martin...

GS: I'd like to ask you first about how 'The O Men' came into being. What was the genesis of such an ambitious and long-running project?

ME: There's 4 different answers to this question, really.

I guess on one level, the basic elements of the O Men story has always been in my head, in some form or other, since I was very young. I've always dabbled in my own comics, and I think certain characters have always been with me from day one. People like Grace and Rob and Stu and Miss Scarlet – they've always been parts of my various comic superteams.

On another level, I actually drew a version of the O Men story when I was 18 and at university - 10 years ago! Basically, what now comprises the 27 issues of volume 1 started out as a 6 issue series. I still use those pages now for reference. For instance, when I was drawing the Miss Scarlet 'origin' scenes in issue 17, I dug out the pages I drew when I was 18. The core story of volume one is all in those 6 issues. The only major addition to the team in the second incarnation was Kelly (Vixen) - everyone else was pretty much the same (except for Colin (Brainstorm) who was gay and had a really boring boyfriend called Justin). The original 6-issue series was really fast-paced, so for the 'proper' version I've fleshed things out, and added things like the Frenzy/Malice/Eclipse story arcs

On another level, I guess the genesis of the project can be found in pretty much every film I've enjoyed, and every TV series, book and comic that has set my imagination racing over the past 28 years of my life. I like nothing more that leaving the cinema totally buzzing with ideas and inspiration. The last film that did that to me was The Ring (the American one) and it inspired a couple of scenes that I added/altered to the issue I was working on at the time (issue 19). The Ring scared the shit out of me, and I just thought, 'wouldn't it be cool to try and create that effect in a comic?' So hopefully issue 19 will scare the shit out of you

And on yet another level (final one, I promise), relatively late in the day - probably just before I started doing the O Men properly in 1995 - I was struck by two amazing ideas that I've never seen done in a comic, book or film before. These ideas form the whole basis of the series, the explanation for everything - why it's called The O Men, why the characters have powers, and loads more things like this. These are things that you're going to have to wait until the final volume for, but I'm dropping hints in pretty much

every issue.

GS: Sounds exciting! Any additional hints? And that clears up a misunderstanding of mine - based on the name alone, one could be forgiven for believing the series was a simple spoof of/homage to the X-Men. But it's so much richer and more complete than that.

ME: No hints, I'm afraid. Oh, go on then. The 2 main themes of the series involve 2 of the main castmembers. Which is probably pretty obvious anyway. You could probably guess one of them. To be honest, there are at least half a dozen reasons why the series is called The O Men, and the X-Men homage is one of them. It's a nod to the reader of the kind of thing they can expect. Believe me, there's a far sillier O Men title reason! In a way, it's up to the reader to decide which reason they prefer.

GS: I need to know – you've got some of the coolest names in superheroes. Where do the names of your characters come from?

ME: I'm really proud of the names of my characters. I think they've got a certain cool element to them. When I was a kid, I read a DC comic with a character called Elongated Man and I thought, what the hell kind of stupid name is that? And to be honest, it did put me off DC a bit (and I did a piss-take of Elongated Man in issue 15). So I really make the effort to come up with cool names for my characters

To be honest, it doesn't actually take much effort to come up with the names - I think the most difficult name was Miss Scarlet. I didn't have a clue what to call her for ages, she was 'Red' for a quite a bit, then 'the Vamp', then just 'Isabelle', but I wasn't happy with any of them. (If Cluedo want to sue me over 'Miss Scarlet', by the way, I'll just change it to 'Ms Scarlet', so there.)

I think the other cool thing is that sometimes the names actually come first. Suddenly a cool name will pop into my head, like 'Glimpse', 'Eclipse', or 'Liberty', and then I'll just come up with a design concept for them. (You've met Eclipse, Glimpse is in issue 19 and Liberty is a transvestite superhero who I am dying to introduce.) Sometimes the most difficult thing is coming up with 'real names'. It's actually harder than you think - try it. I sometimes resort to looking in the phone book. You want to get it right, as I feel names do capture people's personalities. Like, I'll look at my friends and think, yeah he looks like a Marcus, or whatever. As for the O Men, Grace is an unusual name these days, but I think it sums up her kind of old-fashioned, gentle personality. Rob is my brother's name - I think it kinda sums up his cool, laidback personality - and Abby is quite a strong name for a woman. My parents tell me that I would have been called Abby if I had been a girl, so there's a slightly fucked-up element there (totally unintentional, believe me)... I could swear that Kelly wasn't Vixen's original name. I'm sure I came up with the perfect name for her and then managed to forget it. But Kelly's okay Names can be difficult, but they can also be fun. Like the initials of the PSI-

SQUAD members actually spell out 'PSI-SQUAD' (Perception, Shine, Inferno, Spiral, Quest, Ultramind, Astral, Debris). Shine was actually called 'Salubrior' (sort of, but not quite, Latin for 'healer') for a bit... Oh dear.

GS: Let's just hope that Perception, Inferno, Shine and Spiral don't form their own splinter group...

ME: Ho ho!

GS: Perhaps the most impressive thing about 'The O Men' is the level of commitment you've brought to the project. You've been on the go for several years already, and have another thirty-odd issues planned. All this on top of a full-time job, and - as a consequence of publishing within the small press - with little creative recognition or financial remuneration. Bearing that in mind, what does it take to -
A) Map out the story in its entirety years ahead B) Stick with the tale you're telling, rather than getting excited about some new idea C) Not throw your arms in the air, yell 'Stuff it,' and decide you'd rather just watch the tele?

"I didn't really start THE O-MEN to make money. I started it to get this *fucking* story out of my head!!!"

ME: Before I go to the As, Bs and Cs, I just want to say that the financial remuneration situation doesn't bother me at all. Obviously it'd be nice to make a million out of The O Men, but, to be honest, I didn't really start The O Men to make money, I started it to get this *fucking story out of my head*!!! And - as twee as it may sound - the positive letters I've had from readers are worth just as much to me as money. And as long as I don't *lose* any/much money on The O Men, that's fine by me (I'm in credit at the moment, hurrah!). Onto the main points, then.
A) It doesn't take much effort at all! Ideas just come to me, and as long as I keep writing them down in my notebooks it's all cool.
B) I seriously don't know how I've stuck to it. I've been making my own comics since I was about 6, and I've rarely got past the first 3 issues before another project came along. I guess I'm just having a blast with The O Men and there are just so many ideas I am dying to tell, and I love all the characters (even the ones I didn't particularly like at first, like Colin and Rob and Abby). With this new 10-part 'Vicious Circle' storyline, each part has at least 2 or 3 major things going on that I can't wait to show. At the moment I'm right in the middle of issue 19 and I just want to start drawing issue 20! It's a frustrating, slow process, but it's all worth it.
C) That does occasionally happen. If I get a really bad review I will be in a really bad mood for a couple of days. I'll never jack it all in – I'm too far into the story to do that - but I will just probably take a couple of days off. I could never give up drawing though. I draw all the time. I'd go mad if I went for more than a week without drawing.

GS: I'm curious as to the process you go through to put an issue together. How long does it take to write/draw/letter/publish an issue of your own comic, and what trials and tribulations does it entail? And after it's all done, how many issues, on average, do you distribute?

ME: Well, first of all, I need to write the darn thing. That entails looking through my story notes and deciding what's going to happen in the issue, and making a note of any key/cool lines of dialogue that are supposed to go in there. And then I will just sit down for an hour or two and plan the story page by page. I'll get a sheet of A4, and do thumbnails on them - 2 pages per A4 page. Just sketching it all out - little stick figures. I might do 3 or 4 drafts of this. Sometimes I'll know exactly what's going to happen, and sometimes I won't - in which case I'll allocate it a set number of pages and decide what happens at a much later stage. I don't always work from a script, but it's helpful if there's a 3 or 4-page dialogue-heavy scene - like the Doctor O/Rob scene in issue 18.

Drawing the issue will take at least 2 months. If I did some O Men every night after work, and every weekend, I'd probably get it done in a month, but life doesn't work out like that! I don't draw it in order, I just pick the scenes I'm the most excited about and do them first! (I tend to leave the background-heavy pages until last!) I tell you, the hardest part of an issue is actually rubbing out all the pencil lines!!! At the risk of sounding like a

total wimp, it's pretty knackering! But worth it, to see the final page, under all the pencil marks.

When I've finished an issue, I'll read it through about 5 times, then do a dummy copy on the work's photocopier, then read it through another 2 or 3 times, to check for any slip-ups and mistakes. Tippex is the worst evil when it comes to The O Men. They don't seem to make Tippex as good as they used to, so it can really fuck things up. It gets all splodgy and makes things worse. Plus then there's the fact that it's very easy to FORGET TO actually add something back onto something I've tippexed out. D'oh. Basically, it's a minefield. I got issue 16 back from the printers and immediately spotted about 10 mistakes. No one would notice them, but they bug me, so I went through all 100 copies, adding things in.

Publishing takes no time at all. I just take the pages down to the local copy shop and they do a really great job. I did have permission to use the photocopier at work, but I abandoned that as it just took up so much time, and the copier kept breaking down too.

Distribution-wise, I have about 50 subscribers and I get plenty of orders whenever I get a good review. I make my money back, so I'm happy. I start off by printing 100 copies, and then reprint as necessary. I've just started selling copies through Gosh and it's going really well. I tried selling comics through comic shops when I first started out, and I gave up because it was so slow. I think there were still some O Men #5s sitting in the Comic Showcase basement after 6 months, and it was quite disheartening. They may have been sold now, but I didn't bother picking my money up from them. And then there were comic shops which didn't want to sell it. Boo! It's a different story now, though. Gosh seem to be shifting loads of copies. I just put 10 of the latest issue in Gosh at the weekend, and on Monday I had an email from someone who picked one up and then wanted the whole set.

GS: Another trademark element of your series is its intelligent and adult approach to comics storytelling. Your book manages to be highly literary (without ever coming off as pretentious or inaccessible), and is self-consciously post-modern. By which I mean it is self-referential, it offers an ongoing commentary on the superhero genre and comics in general, and its characters seem almost consciously aware that they are in a comic book story. Is all of this deliberate?

ME. It is and it isn't. At the end of the day, I am making a comic that I would like to read myself. There are moments in comics like Zenith, The Watchmen, Doom Patrol and Sandman which have totally blown me away. It's a rare feeling when that happens, and that's what I want in my comics, and I want to recapture those awesome moments.

Grant Morrison is a major influence. He has some amazing ideas and he has some truly amazing characters. If I'd never read his Zenith series in 2000AD, I probably wouldn't be creating The O Men. Zenith was not just brilliantly written, but there are some amazing

Zenith moments. Things like when he'd had the shit beaten out of him in the second volume, and he'd found out all sorts of nasty things about his family, and he just says "Right. That's it." He's had enough and he heads out to kill his enemies. It's a very real moment. It's what I'd do. And there's a bit in the wonderful third volume where the villains duff up this rather chubby superhero and they just say "Look at fatty there, on the floor." I mean, that's what a real villain is like – he's a total wanker! Forget global domination, being a total shit to people is just as bad.

So basically my mind is just a blender of all the comics/films/books I've ever enjoyed, and I use it all to influence and create something new. As for the characters being consciously aware that they are in a comic book - well there's two answers to that. Firstly, it's just a bit of fun. Sometimes a character will say something weird that's obviously aimed at the reader, and that's just me playing around. It's a nod or a wink to the audience. I do like to think of my characters being real, and when you're reading the O Men they invite you along with them.

Secondly, the whole reality thing of The O Men is going to be addressed further down the line. It's tied in with those two major themes I mentioned earlier. Incidentally, I am still working it all out. I know where it's headed, I just need to decide some of the logistics and just how far I want to take it all. It could go in a nasty direction or it could go in a nice one. It depends what mood I'm in.

GS: I can definitely see the influence of stories like Zenith. You seem to have taken the whole thing one step further, however, creating characters and a fictional world with years of history and hundreds upon hundreds of pages behind them. I think you're turning into the British Dave Sim! A further distinctive characteristic of your work are the ubiquitous Strong Female Characters. 'The O Men' features some of the smartest and most prominent women in comics (to such an extent, in fact, that it sometimes feels that the blokes are almost superfluous). And without being overtly sexual, you manage to make them as alluring as they are complex. Are women just more interesting to write/draw?

ME. Yes, I do find women more interesting to draw. You can do a lot more things with their hair and their body language and their clothes, and just have fun coming up with the sexiest images possible. You can't really do much with men, really!

I do find women more interesting to write, too. It's the Ripley Factor. When I saw the first Alien film I couldn't believe that Ripley survived when all the blokes, including the Captain, died. I was just so used to reading comics where the Invisible Woman would scream at the first sign of trouble or films where women would faint left, right and centre. I do find women in science fiction and

fantasy fascinating. The fact that they're just as tough as men. The first issue of The X-Men I read featured just Rogue, Storm and Mystique, and I just thought, how cool is that? Strong female characters are such a cliché really I guess (and I take the piss out of the concept in issue 18) but it's interesting too. The fact that these women are fighters and they are in the same league as the guys, which, I guess, isn't really the general perception of the natural order of things. And I like nothing more than doing nasty things to the ladies, and seeing how they pick themselves up from it.

My O-women aren't all strong, though. Abby's still a bit of a wild card, as far as I'm concerned. I've never really had a grasp on her character. It makes it more of a challenge, though.

And I am starting to find the male characters more interesting too. I didn't really like any of them when I first started, but Rob has really become one of my favourites. I see Rob as the ideal version of me – trying to do the right thing and generally trying to be optimistic and nice all the time (which isn't always possible in Martin-Land). Doctor O and Pathe are always fun. Doctor O is a right old bastard. I've struggled with Colin though. I figure he's the strong, silent type, which doesn't always make for interesting storylines. I have a subplot waiting to happen to him, but there's so much other exciting stuff going on that I've had to drop him from the past 4 issues!

GS: So you're not planning on renaming the series 'The O Women' anytime soon?

ME: Miss Scarlet considered The 'Ho Women in issue 16!

GS: After 4 years, and something like 500 pages under your belt, you must be drawing yourself out of house and home. What do you do with all your finished artwork, and would you ever consider putting pages up for sale?

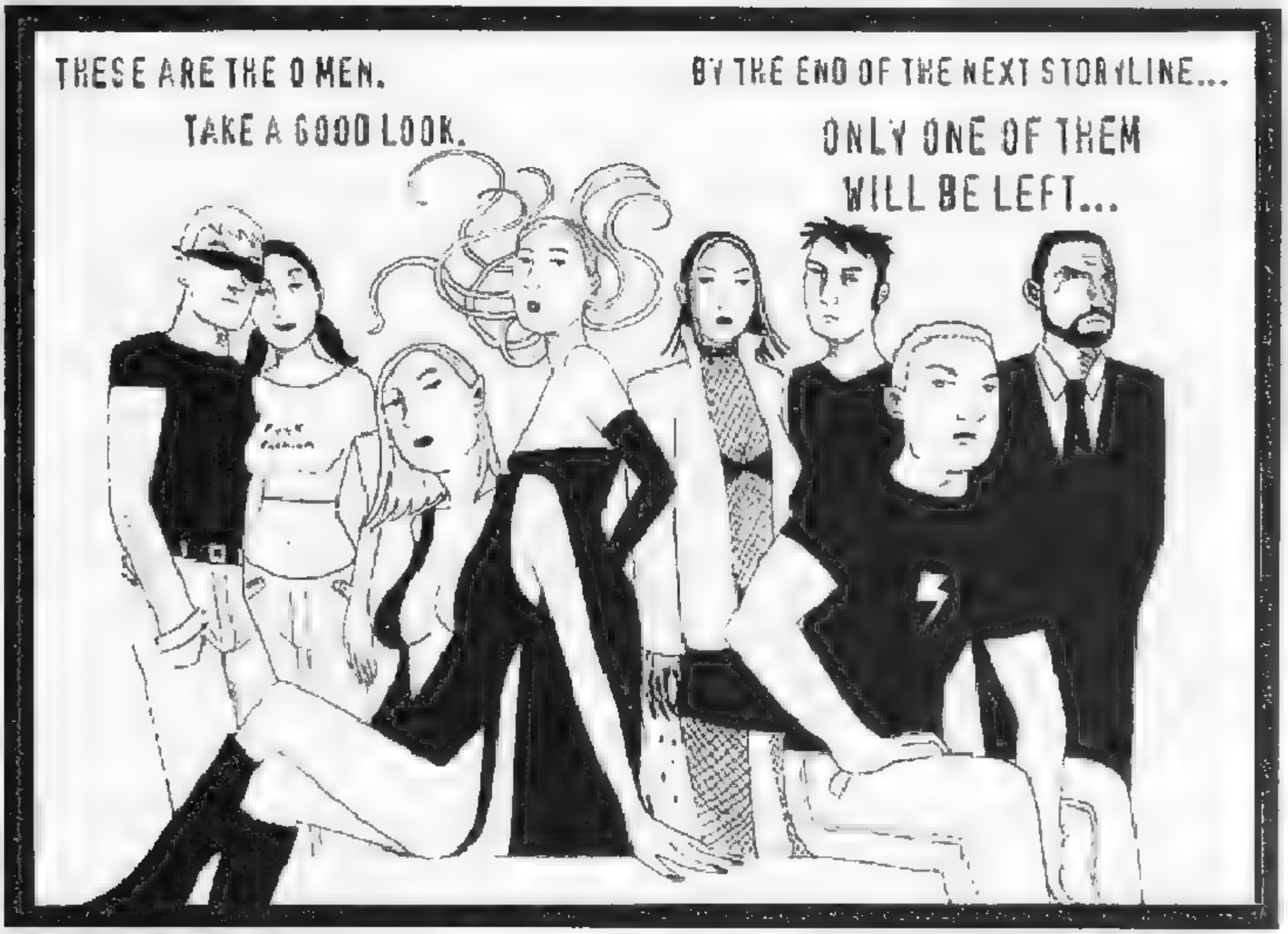
ME: It's a Living Nightmare!!! I have so many pages. I keep everything. All my sketches, all my thumbnail 'scripts', all the original art. God only knows if all the bits I pritt-sticked on to the original art have actually stayed on after all this time. The flat I live in is quite small, so there's not enough room for everything there. I basically have got a big pile of stuff at the end of my desk at work and I really need to sort it all out. Whenever I get a new order for back issues I'm like, 'Oh fuck, where did I put those copies?!!' I need a secretary. I might sell pages a few years down the line, if I get round to making decent copies of everything or get things on disk, or whatever.

GS: And finally... Not to cause you even greater concerns over your shrinking living environment, but what are your plans for the future? More O Men? Something completely different? A globe-spanning comics empire?

ME: Well I definitely want to tell the rest of the O Men story. There are 9 more issues left of volume 1. Then, ideally, I will do two more O Men volumes. The 2nd volume would be a 12-part Watchmen-like ongoing adventure with a slightly different team. The 3rd part would be something different entirely. It would probably be 3 4-part arcs focusing on specific characters and it would explain what has really been going on in the series. But in the unlikely event that I do get sick of the whole thing and decide to finish it after volume 1, I would definitely do some sort of wrap-up issue (or two), explaining where things would have gone, so don't worry. At the moment, although I am enjoying The O Men, I do have a desire to create a simpler comic, where not everything is interconnected. Just something light and fluffy and fun.

I've just teamed up with a friend, Grant Springford, to form Ominous Comics, a small press company. He does his own Pest Control comic and we're hoping to do an anthology fiction series very soon. So who knows where that will end up. Hopefully, a globe-spanning comics empire! Basically, I just can't stop drawing!

GS: No complaints here. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us, Martin, and best of luck with that decadent global publishing empire!



Sleepless Planets

STU YOUNG talks to possibly todays' busiest comic book writer, WARREN ELLIS

Warren Ellis is one of the most prolific and popular writers of comics and graphic novels in the world today. His many works include Transmetropolitan, Planetary, Scars, Bad World, and Global Frequency. His forthnight views on the comics industry can be found in Come In Alone. He also writes a weekly column at www artbomb net His army of fans includes Patrick Stewart, Joss Whedon, Bruce Sterling, Darren Aronofsky, and Michael Moorcock.

Stuart Young: You work on so many projects, in so many different media (comics, reviews, articles, web-comics, computer games, photography etc.) How do you maintain your gargantuan work schedule? Through the sheer joy of creative expression? Or industrial strength amphetamines?

Warren Ellis: Provided my health is stable and all other things are equal, it's all about time management and space to move. I get bored quickly. Keeping several things on the go at once guarantees that every day there's going to be something I feel like working on. And I need that. Writing isn't something you can just switch on and off. The need to make something, and the ability to get my brain into that gear, is crucial. And I don't feel like writing, say, *Scars* every day, because it's horrible and exhausting. So I've got something like *Two-Step* there, that's funny or *Global Frequency*, which is like making a little action movie, or I can grab the camera and shoot texture for the next photo / prose book I have in mind That's the trick.

SY: Lots of your stories depict rather bleak visions of the world. How much of that is a reflection of your own hopes and fears and how much comes from the conventions of the genres in which you write?

WE: Depends on whether you think the world of *Transmetropolitan* is bleak. I don't. It's very much a reflection of the world outside my window, presented as SF in order to get enough distance from it to present it for calmer consideration. *1984* is nothing but a presentation of how one man saw the world outside his window in 1948 It reeks of the postwar debris, right down to rationing and brittle cigarettes and the Churchill / Stalin fusion of Big Brother. That said, I'm a Viridian Green, I give to environmental charities and projects to protect indigenous peoples... so I guess you could draw your own conclusions

SY: Your public persona comes across as rather irascible, not to mention downright scary. Is that the real you or is your wrath only directed at those you feel deserve it?

WE: I think you'd have to ask someone else about that

SY: In a similar vein, what was your first reaction when Brian Michael Bendis asked you to cameo as the comics writer who is "a bit of a git" in *Powers* #7?

WE: I laughed I laughed more when I saw the script. We're both big fans of *The Larry Sanders Show*, and it really had that tone about it. I thought it was funny

SY: You've gradually been cutting back on your superhero output over the years and branching out into other genres such as SF, horror, and crime. Is this creative freedom as much fun as you thought it would be or do you want even more?

WE: More. Creative freedom shouldn't even be a question. It's what we're all in the game for -- to tell any story we want, all the stories we want. Anyone who tells you otherwise needs to quit now.

SY: Do you find that switching between genres leads to different role models influencing your writing?

WE: Sometimes, dependent on the job. Like anyone else, I'm a mishmash of a thousand different influences strained through my own opinions and views, and the end result is what we laughingly call "my style". But, often, it's more interesting to apply influences across genres: the crime writer Derek Raymond, for instance, was probably the biggest single influence on my *Hellblazer* run, which was pure horror fiction

SY: There were rumours at one point of a live action version of Planetary. Is there any chance that it might still go ahead? If so, what input would you have with the show?

WE: At this point, that's on hold, I'm told. WB couldn't find a producer to touch it – one of those approached told me that he didn't take it "because I didn't want to be known as the guy who fucked up *Planetary*" I believe the WB's option is still live for a little while, but I don't expect to see anything.

SY: What do you feel is the single most important thing the comics industry needs to do if it hopes to find a mainstream audience?

WE: Head out of arse. In comics, "mainstream" means superhero comics. Everywhere else, "mainstream" means everything else, pretty much. In comics, About a Boy would be classified as indie art-comics. There's your problem right there.

SY: How do you feel the majority of your readers reacted to Transmetropolitan's savage satire? As a political revelation? A reaffirmation of things they already knew? Or just as pure entertainment?

WE: Every week of those five years of *Transmet*, someone emailed to tell me that they were moving into journalism because of the book. I think a lot of people never got that I made very little up for *Transmet*

SY: Which of your works to date are you most proud of?

WE: There are a few issues of *Transmet* I can still look at without cringing too badly. I'll defend the way I built *Global Frequency* #1 to the ends of the earth. Elements of my *Hellblazer* run still please me.

SY: What's the one project you'd love to do but no one would ever have the guts to publish?

"I'll defend the way I built *Global Frequency* #1 to the ends of the earth."

ART: Previous page from PLANETARY by John Cassidy this page from GLOBAL FREQUENCY by Gary Leach.

WE: We may well soon find out.

SY: You're something of a technophile. Do you think that all entertainment / literature and news / information will eventually emanate from cyberspace? And would that be a bad thing?

WE: I don't see print going away It's always going to be too valuable Running off a handbill on a photocopier is always going to be cheaper and more direct than slapping up a website Even with the advent of phone-based smart mobbing in Europe and Asia, local action will be based around print for some time to come And the possibility remains that the net may never develop a workable economic system to support art and reportage

SY: If you could have cyborg implants such as those you depicted in Mek what enhancements would you choose?

WE: Camera in the eye. Phone trait. Medical machines in the bloodstream. The list goes on.

SY: You are talking about setting up a website to showcase various creative types; writers, artists, musicians etc. Exactly what are your hopes and objectives for the website?

WE: I'd like 'Sleepless Planet' to be a little snapshot of the things that are going on creatively on the new fringes of the net – the people talking on Livejournals and email lists and message for a, the people putting creative work on the web regardless of whether someone's watching. People making new things. I'd like to see all that.

SY: What are your plans for the future?

WE: Sleep, travel, sleep, great riches, sleep, a new body, sleep

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Analogue Art Droid

DAVE WEST speaks to legendary artist IAN GIBSON

Ian Gibson is probably best known for his artistic endeavours that resulted in Halo Jones becoming an instant classic for 2000AD back in 1984. Since then he has worked on numerous 2000AD characters, such as Robo Hunter (where he was co-creator with John Wagner), Judge Anderson (above) and Dredd himself, as well as Star Wars for Dark Horse comics. A natural artist, with a distinctive style, Ian has a keen sense of design, which he brings to every page.

A long time admirer of his work, I of course jumped at an opportunity to interview Ian for this issue of REDEYE, what follows is our echat about his work and his views on the current state of the industry.

DAVE WEST: ***Ian, it seems to me that writers have always received more credit for comic book creations than the artists, and yet comics are such a visual medium. Do you think this a fair comment?***

IAN GIBSON: I guess that a good story deserves to be acclaimed, as dreaming up original ideas can be difficult - I have no problem, but then maybe my ideas aren't all that brilliant, otherwise I'd probably be doing more writing than drawing.

I'm not sure that your comment can be that absolute. Artists like Bisley tend to make more of an impact and I'm not sure that the reader cares who wrote the stories - but for my own tastes that kind of art destroys the story as it is not "story-telling" illustration. It is art for its own sake and for the glory of the illustrator. My personal take is that the job is to tell the story as best you can... and spectacular images are for "glory albums" and not so much for stories themselves. Ideally comics are a collaborative process (he says with a wry smile)!

DW: ***I agree that a great comic has the two elements coming together to compliment each other, with neither trying to take the limelight. A difficult thing to accomplish I guess, as both creators are trying to 'wow' both the audience and the companies who will hopefully produce their next work. Also the need for comics to try to appeal to a wider market will drive companies to try to appeal to both tastes, those who buy them for the art and those who do so for the story.***

IG: I'm not sure that I agree that the publishers are always that aware. It seems that there aren't too many stories worth reading, and the quality of the art seems to be dropping by the day too. However, I am informed that it is a fashion thing and new artists are copying some stylistic devices that they don't have the talent to use properly. But we all have to start someplace and who am I to criticise as my own first attempts (and some more recent ones!) have left a lot to be desired quality wise.

There is always the problem in publishing of getting ideas past the editor. On a magazine like *2000AD*, as well as the *DC* and *Marvel* houses, where the editors change as often as the weather, it can be frustrating to find ideas that one editor liked don't find favour with the next. This happened at Marvel recently with the *Starjammers* story I was doing with John Ostrander. We did a job for an outgoing editor and when the new one took over he shelved the work and it has never been published. Editors are also trying to make their mark and imprint their identity onto the product for their publishing masters to approve of them - so there are more factors than just the writer artist equation involved.

DW: So, on to one of the most famous 2000AD strips ever, Halo Jones. Here you collaborated with Alan Moore to produce one of the best loved characters from the long history of the comic. I believe the original concept of a 'girl power' character (to use a term that has arrived many years later) was yours. How much did the finished product reflect your original idea?

IG: I just went to the then editor Steve MacManus and told him that I wanted to do a girl's story and that I wanted Alan to write it, if it could be arranged. Happily Alan was just across the room at the time, so Steve introduced us and I put the idea to Alan and he was happy to work with me. So he went

away to dream up a story with the parameters I'd suggested of reality and genuine feminine interest as opposed to just being a body to hang tits on, who had the same dialogue regardless of gender. I guess that was what inspired me to make that move. I'd read a couple of then recent stories where the figures were "women" but the writer hadn't made their characters women - they were just dummies with big tits as a token for the boys and their personality and character was irrelevant. This offended me and I thought that the girls who were reading *2000AD* were being short changed - so I wanted to do something for them.

As to whether Alan came up with what I wanted - I believe that he surpassed himself and produced more than I could have hoped for! I hadn't asked him to write a best seller - but then he probably didn't expect me to draw one either. We just gelled on the project and had fun doing it too.

I can't claim to have originated "girl power" and indeed I have received some flack from ardent feminists about the *Halo* story as "using" them for my own ends - a wicked manipulator of women for my own advancement!? You just can't please everybody! I'm just happy that I seem to have pleased quite a few of them !

DW: ***Any new Halo Jones in the pipeline then?***

IG: I'd love for there to be some *Halo* in the offing, but as far as I know (and remember that nobody tells me anything!) Alan is not at all interested and *Rebellion* don't care either (and they hold the rights).

DW: ***It's a shame about Halo Jones, and I do hear that Alan Moore is retiring from comics ... kind of ... but there must be other writers who'd be interested in doing a Halo story ....***

IG: Well, I really don't know what is happening with Alan - maybe he's more involved with being a 'magician'..? As to the *Halo* story - I think I did a fair job at writing books four and five in preparation, if *2000AD* were ever brave enough to continue with the story. Some of my script and plot for those books has been leaked by sources at *2000AD* into the public domain, as I sent the editor there my script and plot some years ago and never heard anything till the rumour mill of the internet came up with some of my ideas as if they were Alan's..?

DW: Quite a compliment I guess ... I always get disappointed when I hear about companies causing problems for creators . in the end the people who are really missing out are the fans. But then I guess the fans are only a means to an end for larger companies. Surely a revival in interest in Halo would only serve to sell more Graphic Novels of her earlier stories..?

IG: Alan threw a real wobbly (so I hear - it's all a distant memory now) when we had arranged with a French publisher to continue the series for him but *Fleetway* stepped in to try to do some kind of deal behind his back (Alan's that is) and as he seemed to have a burning hatred for them it scuppered the deal

ABOVE: Art from DESTINY; BACKGROUND: HALO JONES COVER Prog 376.
Next page back ground: JUDGE DREDD Daily Star artwork

"Comics seem a little like chocolate covered tomatoes right now!"

entirely. Publishers seem to have little respect for the fans - they are just there to buy the comics almost regardless of what rubbish is inside. I can't pretend to understand what kind of warped business logic they follow to come up with the disastrous schemes that they do..? All I can assume is that they don't have any capability for taste testing like *Cadburys* or whoever make candy bars - otherwise logic would assume that as people eat tomatoes and chocolate that chocolate covered tomatoes would do a storm! Comics seem a little like chocolate covered tomatoes right now!

DW: Moving on to discuss you artistic style, your figure work always strikes me as dynamic, whether the person is running, fighting or merely sitting down gazing at a computer. I notice that your proportions are 1 : 5, head to head lengths in the body, which is not traditional. This serves to somehow make the females more feminine, and certainly enables people to spot your work, as it is quite distinctive. Is this something that you did naturally or something that evolved after many hours slaving over a sketch pad?

IG. It sounds like you analyse my work a lot more than I do!? ;) Any proportional discrepancies are my own idiosyncrasies and that's all. There's nothing particularly deliberate about them, and I admit that I didn't notice that such was the case. I just draw stuff so that it looks right to me

Possibly the dynamics of the poses are from my attempt to get everything in the right place design wise - though most of that comes naturally and I don't set about measuring up pictures to position things according to any arcane scheme. It's more a matter of feel. Knowing that when things are correctly positioned for the eye to travel well around the page or the frame then the design is going to work. The drawing becomes easier as a result. If I'm struggling with an image, regardless of how well I think some aspects are drawn, I will usually scrub it out and start again as I reckon it must have been a positional problem within the design.

DW: Did you study art formally or are you self taught?

IG: Well I did spend some time at art college but I wouldn't say that it prepared me for comics in any way. It was fine art and that meant that it was more of an experiment in finding out who you were expressively rather than effecting any great discipline artistically, and definitely no technical skills. So, since then it has been a "teaching myself" process, and as a result I don't have any slick techniques and everything is still an experiment from the moment the pencil touches the paper. Maybe it keeps me fresh? I know it certainly causes some disasters too!

DW: Ah 'pencil touches the paper', I wonder if that'll still be an expression three generations down the line.

DW: There is, as you say, a strong element of design in your work, something that acts subliminally to help the reader absorb the page. Are there any rules that you follow ? Does each page of script bring a strong central image to mind, which you then work around building the rest of the page to tell the rest of the scripted story ? Or do you pop down the pub for a pint to find the sequence enters your mind whilst you are discussing who buys the next pint?

IG: Oddly enough the "working around a central image" is the way Mike McMahon described his way of working to me. I realised what a great artist he is when we worked on an animated film project together. Sometimes it happens that way for me too. But as a general principle I read through the script and try to find the turning points and climax-critical moments and visualise them first and then the rest falls into place around them... I think. But it is not really a formulated process and it definitely doesn't happen over a pint as I don't like the taste of the stuff, so I don't drink very much or very often at all.

I rarely start at page one and work from start to finish. There are usually some images that spring to mind immediately and I will work those up wherever they are in the story and then go through a process of finding the rest of the story around them. And I do believe that the pencil will still be touching the paper for a long time - I know mine will as there is a distance created by the machine which makes drawing with computer a less than spiritual experience. And I do believe that there is a spiritual side to illustration where the artist exposes his inner being to his audience

DW: Exploring your comment about the spiritual side of art, does this mean that you have to 'feel right' in order to confront a piece of work ?

IG: Sadly the business of comic illustration doesn't have the flexibility within the deadlines to allow for too much soul searching to happen. To demonstrate this quite effectively let me tell you about one particular page in *Halo Book 3* where *Luis Cannibal* is peering sternly out at us during his trial. I was inking this piece while my wife was standing over me screaming (about stuff that only women seem capable of considering it worth screaming about - in other words, I can't even recall what it was about!). The tension was so thick in the air and coursing through me that it felt as if every line was being burned into the page as the brush moved with steady determination. Now that really is Zen! ;)

DW: All the more moody for the fact that it is rendered in black and white. I hated what Quality Comics did when they reproduced Halo ... colouring it lost all of the impact for me and detracted from the whole package. Ah well .. thanks to Titan for the Complete Ballard of Halo Jones .

IG: *Quality Comics* was the absolute oxymoron (if that's applicable?) as quality is exactly what they lacked in production values - the stretching of the art to fit the page format was so simple minded that it was tragic! And who the hell did they get to do the covers? It's amazing that *Halo* had any American fans at all!

DW: Your comment about computers hit the rift that seems to be developing in the world of art, and comic art in particular. There are artists who allegedly work exclusively on the computer. Do you feel that this is a step in the wrong direction? Is art produced in this way somehow less, or lacking in some aspect, than that produced with more traditional tools?

IG I seem to have been officially designated as an Analogue Art Droid. I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most advanced equipment on the market, thanks to the generosity of a London design studio who gave me the chance to play with their latest toys on the graphics front. To their dismay I wasn't too impressed, as despite all the refined adjustments they made, the "pen" still fell way short of the sensitivity of a bog standard pencil. And on the colouring front, I have found programs like Photoshop an absolute pain to use and watched with horror as others have struggled with the idiosyncrasies of the design package which wastes an enormous amount of time. The old fashioned methods would have produced a result in a fraction of the time. The only good thing I have found on a computer is the undo function - which in itself is a criminal invention as it allows for a laziness of mind when decisions are made. At least with my airbrush I can create subtlety with a flick of the wrist in a matter of seconds and my brush marks have a flexibility that no computer has come close to challenging It will take some kind of technological earthquake to convince me that computers have any kind of genuine future in this illustration business for the real artist apart from as some kind of support tool. And remember I have been involved with computers since the old valve systems of the sixties, so I've seen them come an awful long way, but I feel that I also know their limitations and my own as far as they are concerned.

BELOW: ARt from BANZAI BATTALION, Background: HALO JONES Cover Prog 406

Guess I do sound like a bigoted old Analogue droid?!

DW: *So your background is in IT, and working in IT myself I must say it leaves little room for imagination as there are such strict rules that must be followed. What was your first move? Did your IT career support an interest that became a career or did you throw yourself at the mercy of Comic Companies from day one?*

IG: No, the IT job was just a way to make a living when I finished college. It wasn't til the guys at work kept pestering me to use my artistic talents that I took the bold step to venture into comics as I had no idea that I could make a living out of it - I still wonder..? After I found myself an agent for my art through meeting Steve Parkhouse and friends at *IPC*, it still took a long time for me to get comics work. I had to do all kinds of work to stay alive while I drew in the evenings. Sadly there was no way back into IT at the time - as usual it was changing so fast that my experience became old very fast! So I ended up building Spaghetti Junction and being roadie for a rock band while I waited for my agent to come up with a job for me

DW: Anyone we know ... I do recall seeing your work for a Rock Band Cover . was it Ian Gillan ? I seem to remember it had a British feel, a guitarist with a British Isles background.

IG: The T-shirt you're thinking of was one of the last I did - I was *Gary Moore* (known as Mr Ugly in the trade!) but I'd done shirts and stuff for the *Scorpions* and *Marillion* and bands like that, as well as the Album covers for *Thor*, *Girls school* and *Spider* - all part of the period of doing magazine covers for *Kerrangg*!

DW: What was your first paid work ? Did you ever doubt your move?

IG: And that takes us onto what my first ever work was - and that was (as there was no Sci-Fi stuff being printed anywhere in the local UK market) Horror! My first ever work for money was a series of little pocket horror stories for the Swedish market. 60 pages a month for pennies, but it was someplace to start! ;) Happily I don't think I've ever really doubted the move from IT. I might have made a lot more money but I'd have missed the thrill of making people happy through my art, which is a total blast to get feedback from people who you have entertained in some way

DW: Yeah. IT seems to have a way of constantly changing, I think it's done by IT professionals trying to keep the industry alive. It's a shame that the comic industry can't come up with a similar scheme. It seems that reading in general is on the decline as we are inundated with more and more poor quality TV programs and computer games. Is the comic book the last refuge for the printed word ? Do you think comics, as we know and love them, actually have a future ? I note that Graphic

"I think the energy in the independents is a good sign For the future..."

Novels (a term I don't particularly like .. but then I guess Comic Book has been used to define Comics) seem to be becoming more prevalent, having a wider distribution than 'just' comic shops and a much longer shelf life. Is this the future? What can we possibly do to save comics from the slow decline?

IG: Naturally IT has to keep changing to make sure the market is refreshed and the manuals can get more unintelligible every time! The thing about graphic novels is a marketing ploy by the publishers because all the origination should just about be paid for by the original comic run, so the reprint into GN form has printing costs only and with the longer shelf life it is a money spinner for them. If the movie industry ever comes to its senses it will get into publishing comics itself. With a comic, all the pre-production work is done that a movie requires including creating a ready made fan base audience and putting out a comic works out cheaper than the silly money they cough up for Hollywood writers to come up with lame ideas!

My constant refrain for the last few years - something I was banging on about at the Spanish convention in Aviles a couple of years back - is that comics can't compete with the 'wham bam thank you mam' of the playstation type stuff. So a return to storytelling is the only sensible way forward, as that is the area where computer games fall down. That's what I'm trying to get going with John Ostrander, who is a guy with a great storytelling sensibility - so we have a great rapport. If comics don't come to their senses and work on the story side of the medium, they're doomed to be in decline till someone pulls the plug and they become history. Not a rosy future for dudes like me who believe in the power of the medium!

DW: Care to share anything on the proposed collaboration with John Ostrander ? Is this anything to do with your idea for 'Lifeboat' hinted at on your website (www.igibson.demon.co.uk)?

IG: Indeed the collaboration with John is to revamp the *Lifeboat* story and build it into a coherent world. It's amazing how well we get to know our characters, their lives, history and opportunities when we settle down to chat. John and I seem to spark each other in a very happy manner. I did ask him if he wanted to run it in *2000AD* or the *Dredd Megazine*, but when we learned that *Rebellion* want all the rights to any project and don't allow creator owned stories, the answer was that we can probably find somewhere better to place it. So it is still looking for a home. There are other projects that we have in the pipeline too - one is the *Holly* story that was briefly mentioned on my website and has taken a whole new turn and exciting changes have happened since John and I sat down to discuss it properly. We may even pick up the *Destiny* project. So, if all our other things come together, then *Destiny* may well be another thing for us to work on.

DW: Will your new work be in colour or black and white? Do you have a preference?

IG: I plan for it all to be in colour if possible - that depends on the publishers though. My preference is to do fully painted art as that gives me more creative freedom instead of letting someone else mess with my images. I've had very few good experiences with colourists over the years, and as so much is coloured on computer now it gets more tasteless by the day! It would be nice if I had plenty on the cards that was 'guaranteed to be published', but John and I have to sell the stuff first. Wish us both luck!

DW: So what keeps you busy between 'comic' gigs ?

IG: What occupies my time is usually hunting for new work! There doesn't seem to be too much around!

DW: Do you keep an eye on what's happening in comics? Do you keep up through newspapers like Comics International or by buying stuff at your local Comic shop? Or is there some kind of internal 'Comic Creators' network ?

IG: I only catch up with what is happening when I go to conventions and see the publishers' displays. I don't buy comics and there is no local comic shop down here in Sussex that I know of without a trip along the coast to Brighton! So my recent trip to the States to see John and pop over to San Francisco was a refresher as to what is happening in comics at present. Sadly, I was for the most part disappointed with what I saw!!

DW: ***What did you see that gave you hope?***

IG: I think the energy in the independents is a good sign for the future! There are a few artists out there still producing excellent work. It is just a shame it drowns in the amount of pap being flooded by publishing houses onto the market that one would think should know better!

DW: It seems that everybody has been influenced by somebody else in the art world. Are there any artists (comic book or otherwise) who you would state as having influenced you, either by their style, storytelling ability or plain enthusiasm for the genre?

IG: Jack Kirby was the artist who woke me up to the world of comics when I was still studying fine art. Gene Colan drawing *Doctor Strange* and the *Daredevil* expanded my view of what could be done. Then I saw Neal Adams' work and loved it. Once I had an agent from Spain and from there got to see Spanish artists too, like Maroto and De La Fuente and Carlos Gimenez. All staggeringly brilliant! ;) When you see work that you like it represents some aspect of yourself that ignites - so I tell people to copy artists that they admire as a way of learning that aspect of themselves. If they do it with understanding then they grow from the experience as opposed to becoming a slavish copyist - but that's when the artist inside comes through. I'm not good enough to copy anybody, so I have to make it up as I go along!

DW: I notice that you are listed for the Comics Event taking place in London on the 1st November. Is this the first UK event you've done in a while?

IG Yep. I decided to come out from under my rock!

DW: The fans are in for a treat if you're in a 'sketching mood'. As a sketch junkie myself, I do wonder at the British reluctance to 'charge money for a sketch'. In America I know they do head shots for free but will charge a reasonable amount for anything more elaborate. I can't see a problem with this. Kids go happy with a free sketch and us 'junkies' get a piece of art for a few quid. I've seen people pay £30 for the signature of a Star Wars extra, so paying a few quid for a sketch that has involved about 10 minutes of an artists time seems more than fair. I know Staz Johnson has started doing this. What are you views and do you find sketching in front of fans to be a relaxing task or a daunting one ?

IG: To answer both questions in one... I get a blast out of doing sketches for fans and when I was in San Francisco at Isotope I was doing paintings for them too! So I figure that the pleasure I get out of doing stuff for fans and the joy in seeing them thrilled (hopefully) with what they get is payment enough. It isn't about money where the fans are concerned - it is payback time for them having supported me by buying the comics and books! Each to his own, but I am happy to do stuff for free! I suppose that means I have to do you a freebie now?!

DW: You bet!

(Dave West is editor/artist of the DEVA COMICS line, see the website www.devacomics.com. Ian Gibsons fine work can be seen at www.igibson.demon.co.uk.

"Once upon a nightmare..."

ALAN DONALD speaks to the creators behind PANTOMIME PRESS

Pantomime Press are Rich Nairn and Robert Martin. Robert produces 'Pride of an Angel' that has been described as a blend of The Sandman, Promethea and Peter Pan by SFX. Rich produces 'Dr Ripper's Multiplex' an anarchist blend of horror and humour. Both books are very different in style and content but they are both produced in a very high quality A5 format. I had a chat with Rob and Rich...

AD: Tell us about how Pantomime Press got started.

Rich Nairn: Both of us have always been cartoonists of some sort or another and since we met at the age of 18 we had always talked of how it would be great to be comic creators. It wasn't until years later after visiting the Bristol festival that we realised how we could get involved in small press. Amazing that we'd never thought of it before really. A few years went on and we had both managed to come up with our own stories and printing methods, Robert thought of the name Pantomime Press, I designed a logo, Rob tidied it up as he was the only one with a decent computer and we were off to Bristol 2001, ready to be told we were wasting our time... luckily that didn't happen.

AD: Was it all plain sailing or where there a few horror stories along the way?

Rich: On my part there's been lots of swearing and sweating, but I think on reflecton it's been pretty unnecessary For me it's been quite a blissful experience with brief spasms of panic when things reach a tight schedule. The only nightmare I remember was a stall we had at Camden a couple of years back. I thought "Camden, lots of cool and quirky people.. it'll be a breeze." We struggled with our bags all the way up there, due to our wonderful rail system arrived late, and then found the only people that came into the hall we were in looked like they belonged in Last of the Summer Wine, needless to say we sold very little

Robert Martin: The only problem we seem to come across is that sometimes people get confused about who Pantomime Press actually is! They often seem to think that pantomime press is just one person. When credited, one of us always seems to get left out and we are forever explaining! We wonder if it's because we are both writers and artists working on separate comics rather than a writer/ artist team.

AD: How's the distribution of the comics coming along? What has been your greatest success in this area? How difficult has it been to get shops to carry your product?

Rich & Rob: Distribution is odd; you'll have months of nothing and then a load of interest at once. Various shops around the country have taken notice; we find the smaller ones show more interest. We've found that sending copies in the post to distributors is quite often a waste of time and money, and that we've had more success talking to them in person so they know where we are coming from. Overall though, we've sold more through mail order than anywhere else, both from the website and from different reviews online and in magazines.

AD: How useful have the Bristol comicbook festivals been?

Rich & Rob: Quite frankly, if it hadn't been for the Bristol festivals, we doubt Pantomime Press would exist, at least not to the extent it is now. The festival in Bristol has been vital for helping us to meet both distributors and other creators that have not only become valued friends but also has been sources of brilliant advice.

AD: What plans do you have for the company in the future?

Rich & Rob: Our stories have seemed to gain regular readers and will hopefully continue to develop new ones, and we both have plans for future releases that seem to stretch on forever. When you look at people like Metaphrog and Gary Spencer Millidge proving to us all that you can develop yourself off your own back to an astounding level, it makes us feel as though we just want to

make Pantomime Press as well known as we can possibly manage. Although saying that, at the end of the day, as long as someone wants to read our work we certainly aren't going to stop.

AD: What advice do you have to anyone wanting to self publish?

Rich & Rob: Just be yourself. Write comic books that would appeal to you, and while taking the advice of others around you make sure most importantly that you are happy with and would want to read the stories you create. There's no hard and fast rule to printing and distributing your comics just find any way that suits you and just do it, and never, never give up.

AD: Tell us about Pride of an Angel. What is it all about and who do you feel it will appeal to?

Rob: Basically, Pride is my interpretation of JM Barrie's Peter Pan. I read Peter Pan properly, for the first time some years ago and was so amazed and surprised by all the possible hidden meanings and stories within it that I decided to make up my own stories based around some of them. I found Peter Pan to be largely about the death of a child Peter being that child, I found to be quite a grim figure, often quite bitter. Even quite careless and nasty when talking to Wendy who just wanted to care and love him. I thought that it was a bit of a love story too! Well on Wendy's part anyway. Tinker bell I decided represented sex and was Wendy's competition.

Having been so inspired by this I started work on my own story that developed into a two part mini series called Pride of an Angel, that I 'launched' at the 2001 Bristol festival, our first Pantomime Press stall! My story focused mainly on death. Michael Pryde I decided would be my Peter Pan! A boy who tragically dies in his sleep on his eighth birthday (eight representing eternity). He's transformed into a figure some where between a super hero, Peter Pan and an Angel, and is taken to a place called Nowhere by a woman called Gabby (my Tinker bell) She tells him that he must make peace with his past and the brother that he has left behind, and so he returns to earth.

As for the question, whom do I think it will appeal too? God only knows! I don't really worry about that sort of thing! I don't really need to. Unlike large companies that need to have a target audience and meet a sales target I don't. I have a day job, print on demand and do this for the love of it. I just hope people read and enjoy what I do

AD: What are the major influences on the series?

Rob: Peter Pan! Obviously! Err! Let me think... artwork wise it has to be Dave McKean, David Mac, Teddy Kristiansen and Bill Sienkiewicz, others include Egon Schiele, Marc Chagall and John Piper. These have always been my main influences, which probably show in the original two parter. I also really like Jill Thompson's Scary Godmother, Linda Medley's Castle Waiting and Mark Crilley's Akiko! I like so much don't I? These influences are probably more obviously in my new Pride series.

AD: Has everything in the title worked out as you'd hoped?

Rob: That's quite funny actually, because the characters have really started to take over and do their own thing. The new series that I've started to do has really moved away from what I originally intended and did with the original two partner. It's less fine art like and more cartoons, which I think suits the story and direction I want to take the series in much better. Although I do sometimes miss the fine art bit. Gluing, sticking and painting! It's also become less Peter Pan like too! A lot of my reviews often say it's like Sandman. I don't really know much about Sandman, as I've never read it. I suppose it's because Michael looks a bit like him, but he's Peter Pan really!

AD: Rob, what plans do you have for the future? Have you any work coming out for other companies?

Rob: I plan on running Pride for about 6 to 8 issues and may do some one-shots after that. I also have plans to do a similar story to Pride called Soulsaver. Which will be fine art like in style and be closer to the original Pride two partner. I don't expect it to be ready until next years Bristol festival tho as I've not started it yet. I've got to do Pride No. 3 first. I also Plan on starting work soon on a one-shot called Sponsored by... A story about the opening of the 100th privately run state school. A world where everything has been sponsored. Sounds familiar eh? I've been asked to submit some work to a new magazine called Tales. Each issue will be based on a different fairy tale and the first will be on the Emperor's New Clothes. I've sent in some work so I'll have to wait and see if they use that. Anna Rubins (Dark) has asked if I would like to illustrate some of her poems, I've said I would but we've not sorted anything out just yet. At some point Richard and I are suppose to be working on something together, don't know what yet! We often talk about it but never seem to get around to doing anything. I'm sure we will at some point.

AD: Tell us about Dr. Ripper's Multiplex. What is it all about and who do you feel it will appeal to?

Rich: Dr. Ripper's Multiplex is a horror comedy set in a lunatic asylum / multiplex. The first comic follows the story of a little girl who gets lost amongst the buildings dark corridors with disastrous results, which set up the premise for the following comics. Throughout the series the reader is subjected to bloodthirsty tales featuring monsters, vampires and psychopaths galore. This comic would suit anyone who likes a good evil laugh at things you shouldn't really laugh about. The variation of people that have read DRM is so diverse, it makes it hard to pin down to a certain type of person, but weirdo's and freaks are a certainty

AD: What are the major influences on the series?

Rich: First and foremost, the things I see every day. It's quite disturbing when I read "Dr. Ripper's Multiplex is full of monstrous characters" because most of the characters in some shape or form are people I know.

I'm enormous fan of horror films, particularly the Hammer films, and am inspired by the overly dramatic way those films play out and to give DRM that feel.

On the art side, I've always loved the way artists like Jeff Smith, Johen Vasquez and Robert Crumb have created their own very different worlds and when you look at their artwork you can tell exactly who has created it.

AD: Has everything worked out in the title as you had hoped?

Rich: I've always had a full story from beginning to end set up in my mind and it has been following along nicely to that plan. The only snag I hit was with issues two and three I would have liked them both to be one whole comic but the tale panned out to be too long so I decided to make it two parts. This unfortunately resulted in the second comic ending a little bit in the middle of nowhere, which was ok but I would have preferred it to have had a more dramatic and final ending.

AD: Rich, what plans do you have for the future? Do you have any work coming out for other companies?

Rich: Well I'm hoping to have finished Issues 4 and 5 for Bristol 2004, which will complete the series, after which I have an idea that spins off from that involving some of the original characters. I also, like Robert, have made a submission to Tales magazine and will be making my usual submissions to Toonedelic Times and Sins of the Flesh magazine. Aside from that, who knows, even I don't remember half the stuff I do

AD: Will you be attending the Winter festival in November?

Rich: Yeah, we should be there. If you don't see us, put it down to whatever excuse British Rail have used... swollen tracks due to heat (even though it's November), leaves on the line, wet tracks, no tracks etc... We'll (probably) be there... will you?

AD: Where can people find out about you guys?

Rich: Go to www.pantomimepress.co.uk.

A Stranger Paradise

ALAN DONALD speaks to one of America's most successful indie creators, TERRY MOORE

There are few indy success stories that can match that of Terry Moore. Strangers in Paradise started in 1993 as a 3 issue miniseries for Antarctic Press and has gone on to win the hearts of fans the world over. ALAN DONALD caught up with Terry to discuss his career so far, how he got started, his advice to new creators and, bizarrely, his hatred of Batman, amongst other things.

ALAN DONALD: How's it all going?

TERRY MOORE: Just dreadful. Thanks for bringing it up.

AD: Is there anything you'd like to get off your chest before we get started?

TM: Yeah. Everything the National Enquirer is printing about me and Hillary Clinton romping around the Bahamas is a damn lie. I never had sex with that woman... Hillary Clinton. OJ's gloves don't fit my hands either, and I have no idea how Martha Stewart's shares got into my portfolio. Now I need to get back to work drawing comics for the American people. Thank you.

AD: Ok then; let's get down to it. Strangers In Paradise started in 1993 after you found you couldn't break into the comic strip market. Why did you feel initially attracted to the newspaper strips?

TM: I grew up reading them and admiring the laid back lifestyles of the creators I read about. I didn't know anything about who was making the comic books or how they lived, so all my role models were cartoonists.

AD: Most of your early ideas were presented recently in Paradise Too but can you talk us through how you got from them to SIP as we know it?

TM: I went through a lot of ideas over a five year period until I decided to stop ramming my head against the wall of syndication. So I looked over what I had made in that time, pulled out the original ideas and characters, put them all in front of me and made them into a cast. Because they came from different ideas, they didn't have a lot in common and the natural friction between them made it easy to come up with story ideas. They were tumbling around in my head and I wasn't sure where to begin. I could picture their day to day life and interaction, but I wasn't sure where to jump in. I was thinking about them all the time, imagining moments and scenes, taking notes, when I decided to begin with the scene of Francine, my clean-cut girl next door type, stripping in the park. I built the first up around that moment, the entire first mini-series actually.

AD: 10 years have gone by but can you briefly describe SIP for the uninitiated?

TM: It is an epic love story that is unique because it uses many different styles of writing and visuals. The story to date has centred on two women, Francine and Katchoo, their relationship and the lives of the people around them. Reading SiP is like being in their circle, hanging out with them It's a salt and pepper like mix of romance story and graphic violence. The violence is realistic and striking, and people who don't read SiP are not aware that this "chick pick" book they avoid in favour of Vertigo or mainstream books is actually far more violent

RE: Why did you decide to try writing/drawing comicbooks?

TM: Because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing something else. I was a grown man with a career and a nice living, but I considered it a waste of my life. I'd rather pay bills doing something I was made to do instead of being somebody's employee

AD: How did you go about getting SIP published? How difficult was the process? What prompted the decision to launch your own imprint within Antarctic Press? What are the advantages of this and how would you say it compared with self-publishing?

TM: I sent a xerox of the first issue to about a

"Weight has nothing to do with beauty or sexy. It's a media myth..."

dozen publishers, independents and mainstream publishers. I also went to a couple of local conventions and showed the xeroxes to retailers and a bunch of DC editors. One day I met Archie Goodwin, who looked at my work and offered me a job starting on Teen Titans, drove home happy and found a form-rejection letter in my mail from the main DC office in NY. If I have any suggestions about how to break into the business, do it face to face, one person at a time. I decided to not pursue work at DC because I really wanted to tell my own stories. I'd been talking to self-publishers and studying up on how they did it. I'd decided to take that approach when I got a call from a guy at Antarctic Press. This guy had seen my xerox and asked me how much of the story I had. I said only that one issue He asked if I thought I could do another one. Well, yeah, I'm pretty sure I could thing of another, I replied. So he offered me a 3 issue mini-series. I said yes and hung up the phone thinking, Now I'm officially in the comic book business. I figured Antarctic could pay the costs for my first 3 comics, plus get me established with the printer and the distributors, while I would promote the book as if I was self-publishing And that's how it worked out. They made the books, I called retailers and hawked the book at shows and just did everything I could to get it into the hands of people. By the the time I started the series under my own imprint, I had the momentum of good reviews and connections. It was so much better than just launching the book on my own as a complete unknown.

AD: SIP was launched quietly but took on a life of its own. Was there a definite point where you realised that it was a hit?

TM: I guess my second year, when I was nominated for four Eisners, and Russ Manning Award and two Harveys.

AD: What is your all time favourite question from the many interviews you've done?

TM: Is Batman gay? [a question Terry answered for The Panel on SBC] Don't even get me started. I don't have anything nice to say about Batman. I have like a 20 minute diatribe about what's wrong with Superman and an even longer one about Batman... much of it profane. I was so looking forward to writing Birds Of Prey and having Barbara Gordon come down on his sorry blue butt bigtime. That guy needs a reality check and I was going to have her do it.

AD: SIP has as many female fans as it does male, did you set out to have this cross gender appeal?

TM. No. I didn't know who would read my story I've had to watch that develop on its own. You know, you make a book and put it out there like turning a child loose on the streets, then you have to wait for it to earn it's own way in the world. See how people react to it when you're not there to talk them into it. Like some sort of chain letter. It's amazing to watch what comes back to you

AD: Many fans talk about having a relationship with your characters, that they are like friends to them. How on earth did you manage to get that level of characterisation so damned quickly? What is it about Katchoo et al that make them so bloody real?

TM: I just write real people. The circumstances may be unusual but the characters are real to me. I'm one of those people who can act out all these different characters, only I do it on paper. Actually I also act out characters and skits and satires all the time at home, in the car or studio, even if nobody's around to giggle with. I'm a dork, what can I tell you. But it helps me get into other people's skin and walk around with their point of view, and that's not a bad thing for a writer to be able to do

AD: Is there a question you wish you'd been asked in an interview that you haven't been? If so what is it and what's the answer?

TM: I wish someone would ask my opinion of the meaning of life. I have it all figured out. Unfortunately I can only explain it in a forgotten bushman dialect that gives me really bad hiccups, so I don't like to repeat it too much.

AD: In 1996 you left the small press and moved to Image, well Homage (now with DC). What prompted this move and why was it so short-lived?

TM: I wanted money and lots of it. They didn't have any so I left.

Just kidding! Kidding. Jeez. Actually, I went because Jim Lee invited me personally to be a part of something cool, and I was ready to try something new. I was with them for a year and learned a lot and got to hang out with Jim a little. He's a great guy but I was always uptight and intimidated around him. I'm just kind of awestruck by the guy, to tell you the truth. One of the smartest people I've ever met... and I used to be a rock 'n roll musician so I've known some real Braniacs, believe me.

AD: You're now recognised as an artist beyond SIP. Is it hard fitting in other art chores with the ongoing schedule of SIP?

TM: Yes, very hard. I can barely get my book done each month and that's kept me from working on some many great projects offered to me. I can only accept something that means a lot to me personally, like a Spiderman story or working with Lucas Films or Amber Benson or, yes, even working on the Bat family books. That Batman, AARGH! I'd like to give him a piece of my mind. I'd like to see him try that crap on me boy.., Why do you keep bringing him up? You know how much he upsets me

AD: What's it like working with another writer after doing everything yourself for so long?

TM: Fun Brian Bendis took the time to ask me what I liked to draw and wrote a story custom fit to my style. Then there was the opposite where Chris Golden and Amber Benson wrote the Willow & Tara story and I didn't know what I was going to draw until I got a finished script.

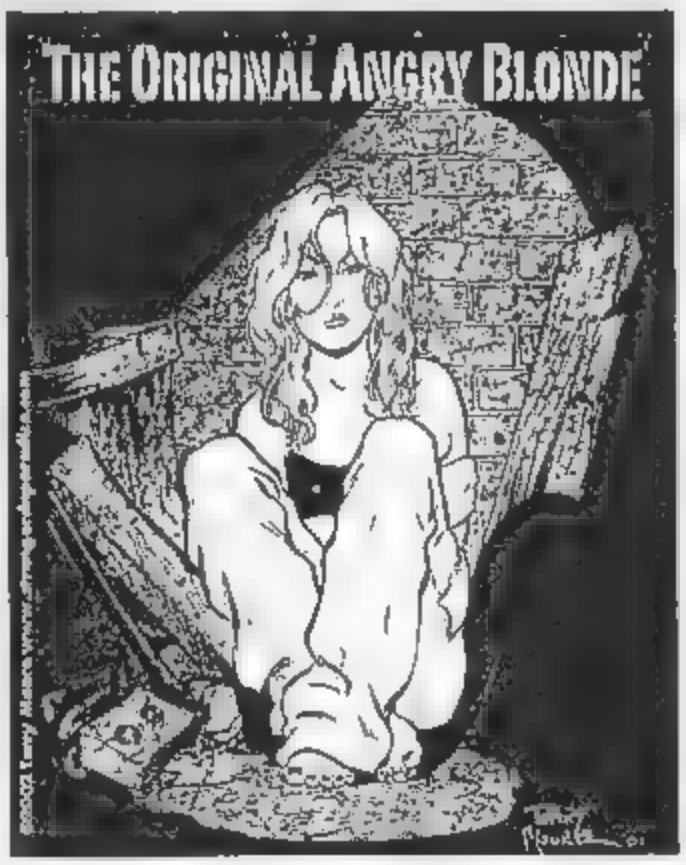
Then I saw the scenes where bodies were being impaled on tree limbs and the a girl was half buried in the ground blended in with tree roots and I thought Wow! What a terrific visual! I'd love to draw that! So I'd say I've had only good experiences with other writers. If you asked me to chose, I'd rather be stuck on a plane next to a writer than an artist. The conversation's going to be better.

AD: How much longer do you see SIP continuing?

TM: An hour and a half. Tops. I don't know. I have a lot of story left to tell. I hope I can get it finished. It won't be ending any time soon, I can tell you that. Not unless my orders dip below 100 copies. Then I may have to weight the value of it all.

AD: How the hell do you manage to capture the inner beauty in all your female characters? Just how do you manage to make Francine look so adorable when she's overweight?

TM: Weight has nothing to do with beauty or sexy. It's a media myth. We listen to all that non-stop Hollywood crap but it doesn't



"We need the diversity of product. A comic book shop full of mainstream comics... doesn't reflect what's really out there in the world, all the variety and colors and ideas."

change the way we really react inside when we meet somebody special at a local hangout that doesn't look anything like a celebrity but SCHWING!. That's my approach with Francine and the others. I try to go for what appeals to me in real life, not what movies, magazines and pop music tell me to think Women are like flowers, there are an infinite variety and they're all beautiful and unique. Everyone of them is a bloody miracle and somebody's idea of perfection

AD: Have you got a favourite character in SIP?

TM: I really like Batman

AD: Any chance of a song?

TM: Yes, funny you should ask. I've been in the studio collaborating with Alan Moore and Tony Blair on the House Of Lords Greatest Hits- Disco Version. Alan's so intense but Tony's been a real party animal. Loads of fun.

Oh, you mean SiP music? yes. Seriously, I am putting together a roster of bands to do Griffin Silver covers songs and the like. I don't know when it would come out. It's a fun project on the side.

AD: Are there any story arcs coming up that you're really excited about?

TM: Yes, I am about to do David's Story. I've always referred to the guy as an iceberg, like we've only seen a small portion of him. This story arc will show us where he came from and how he came to meet Katchoo. Scary stuff.

AD: What has been your proudest moment in your comicbook career so far?

TM. It would be a tie between the time Harlan Ellison called me and told me I was a good writer (even though I had "no f***kin' idea what to do with a comma!") or when HarperCollins chose SiP to launch their new line of graphic novels.

AD: How do you set about starting a new project? Do you have a set routine?

TM: Yes, but it's dismal. I waste time and straighten my studio, do my laundry, piddle around the house, while a blank sheet of paper waits on the drawing table. I try to think and come up with only bad ideas, which scares me into some sort of panic that makes me focus on nothing in particular until I drop from exhaustion... and that's when I can let my mind wander and daydream and I begin to see the story like a movie in my head. I try to imagine scenes I'd like to see, then I imagine how a normal person would get into that situation and how they'd handle it. I build from that.

And sometimes I just make stuff up and write it down, as Gaiman likes to say.

AD: Aside from SIP what else are you working on at the moment?

TM: Only SiP related things right now, but a wide variety of them, most of which are still in development so can't be discussed openly... yet.

AD: What do you think of the small press/self published scene in the US at the moment?

TM. Bleak. Where did everybody go? It's not so much a whole scene anymore as a clip. A soundbite that used to be a speech. So sad. I thought the self-publishing movement brought many good things to the comic book industry. We need the diversity of product. A comic book shop full of mainstream comics is like a church full of white people. There's just something wrong about it, isn't there? It doesn't reflect what's really out there in the world, all the variety and colours and ideas. Gives me the creeps.

AD: Do you know anything about the UK scene at all?

TM: I know the big picture and I've been to visit a couple of times. I did a signing at Page 45 once and spent a weekend in Spain with Ian Gibson, who I've admired since his Meta-4 days. I've met Brian Talbot and Gary Spencer Millidge. I talked to Alan Moore on the phone once. Let's see, what else.... I have some old Beatles albums... Actually, I spent some time in London in the mid-sixties as a boy and bought my first British comics there, Dennis the Menace (the British version), Andy Capp and Boy's Annual, so my comic roots in the UK probably go back further than most of my UK readers.

AD: Have you got any advice for new creators wanting to break through or publish for themselves?

TM: Yes, send lots of blind submissions to DC, that always seems to work. Joke.

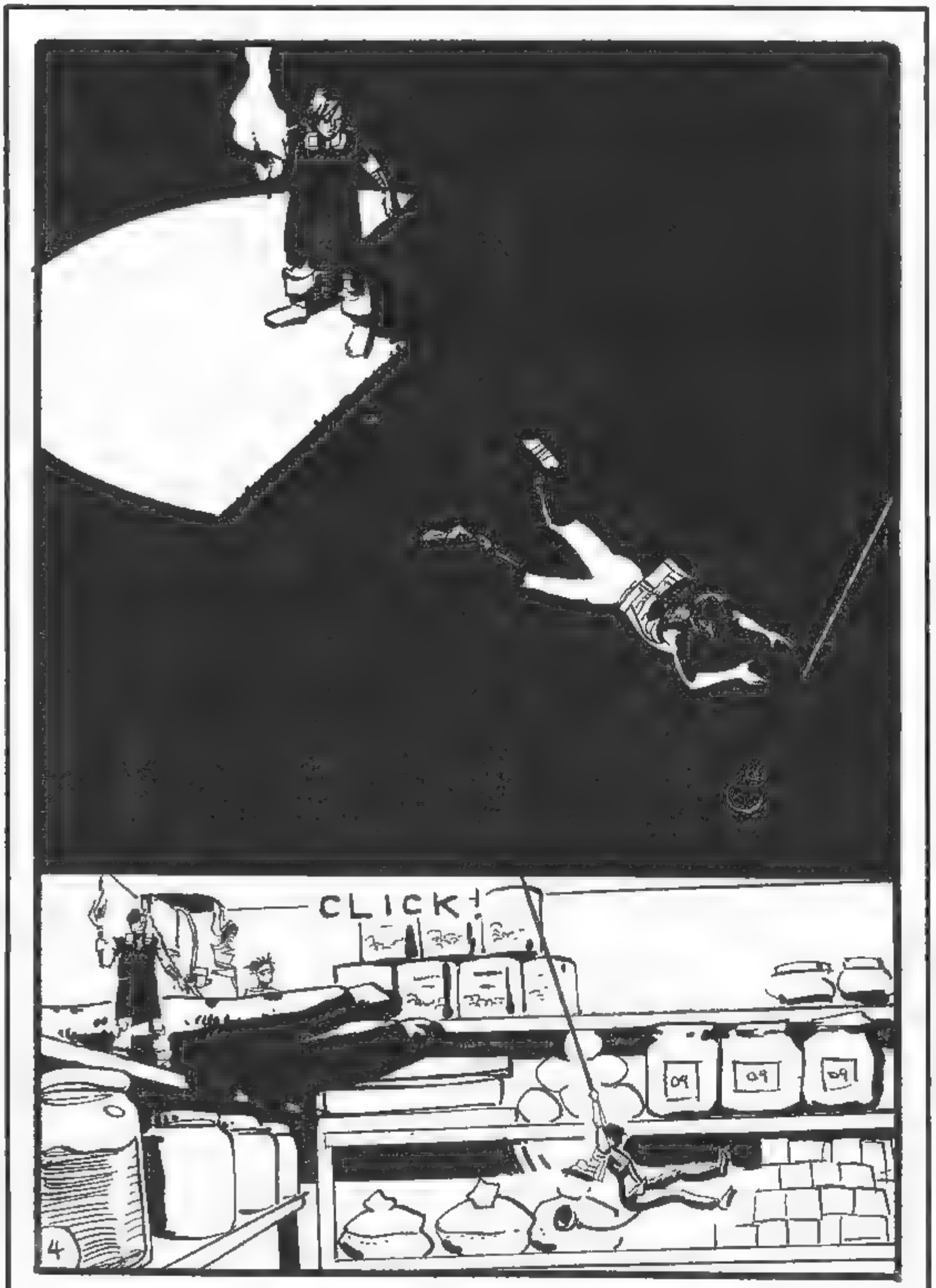
I'd say just push and push your work out there anyway you can. It never seems to happen in one big step, like getting an offer from DC, it's always little steps that lead you to your ultimate goal. Start publishing with friends if you have to, pool your money, take the books to stores and conventions yourself. If you can't afford a table, pass out copies on the front steps of the con and schools and movie theatres, anywhere your readers might be found in large numbers. Use the web to find some readers for your work. Do something original that only you can do and be proud of it, your audience is waiting to discover you. Don't keep them waiting.

AD: Why did the chicken cross the road?

TM: Because I told him to. Nasty little bugger. Reminds me of Batman. Did I ever tell you what I think about Batman?

If you want to find out more about Strangers in Paradise then visit www.strangersinparadise.com.

Of Mice and Men



RAID

MAN ON THE RUN!

It's another fine day over the steel, sweating rooftops of order nine, the giant alien canning factory where human beings are *the mice...*

RAID is the new MICE comic by 2000AD artist Roger Mason, featuring two stories, 'RAID' and 'TROUBLE IN THE BEAN BAY, about the giant alien canning factory order nine. It's big business... Until the resident vermin decide to cut in.

Said Roger about his latest projects: "The graphic novel London Inferno, published by EP Editions in France is out September 12, art by Roger Mason and story by Laurent Frederick Bollée. 80 pg B&W, french language only at the moment. I'm currently lining up my next BD project, nothing concrete yet."

Catfood ('Small press comics at their absolute best' – CI) is still available from the above sources (40pg B&W, £2 or £2.50...).

RAID, £2, 32 pages B&W, now available to buy from Gosh! And Orbital, or order from Roger Mason: 18c Tompion St, London EC1V 0HN or rogermaso.n@virgin.net (£2.50 inc. P&p).
www wubble69.com
0207 608 3638

The Age of Empires

CHRIS WESTON, artist on Vertigo's THE FILTH, takes the first of a two part look at the work of living legend DON LAWRENCE

From the first moment I clapped eyes on his "Trigan Empire" strip in the pages of VULCAN weekly, I'd been fanatical about Don Lawrence's fully-painted artwork and it had always been my ambition to meet up with him. The only way I could think of this happening was to write a letter to "Jim'll Fix It". For the uninitiated, "Jim'll Fix It" was an old BBC television programme wherein a creepy old discjockey by the name of Jimmy Saville would "fix" it for kiddies' dreams to come true . Not as exciting as it sounds, unfortunately, as most of these kids asked for dull, unimaginative favours such as "please could I ride a pony" or "please could I visit a sweet factory". I asked for Jim to "fix it for me to meet my favourite artist in the whole world, Don Lawrence!" Thanks to a bizarre twist of fate, I never had to post that letter: a new boy had just joined my school, by the name of Kal Lawrence, and you'll never guess who his father turned out to be! That's right, only THE Don Lawrence! Spooky coincidence or what!

So that's how I came to meet Don at his studio in Jevington, in 1983. I was almost dumb-struck by trepidation. I needn't have worried; he was welcoming, attentive and generous: I came away with an armful of signed books and posters. After that, Don couldn't get rid of me, I'm ashamed to admit. I had my heart set on becoming a comic-strip illustrator myself, and Don nurtured that enthusiasm over the ensuing years by patiently letting me visit him again, and again, just to sit and watch him paint. To his credit, if I ever got on his nerves he never let it show; he was astonishingly generous with his own time. I like to think he recognised in me a genuine passion for the craft, and he expanded my knowledge by introducing me to the work of european comic-strip artists like Moebius, Bilal, Tardi and Alfonso Font. Prior to that, my only experience of comic art had been from various British and US comics. I went on to study art at "A" Level and, in 1987, I eventually secured a place on an Art Foundation Course at Brighton Polytechnic. However, at this point Don kindly offered me a year's apprenticeship with him. A whole year of personal tuition from a comic-strip master! It was an incredible opportunity. As you've probably guessed, I kissed goodbye to all further thoughts of a university education.

Every weekday, for the next year I'd cycle eight miles, up-hill to Jevington, and then buckle down to work in his studio above the garage. Let me tell you, being Don's student was no picnic: his theory was that he couldn't teach someone to draw; that was something they could only do for themselves. What he would do, however, was give me an intense course in comic-strip art techniques like inking and colouring. I was told to reproduce pages of comic-strip art by my favourite artists exactly, in identical detail. This forced one to scrutinise their techniques and by the very act of reproduction, you'd absorb their approach to producing artwork. I hated doing this, it was pain-stakingly slow work, difficult and boring. It took a great deal of self-discipline to endure, but that's exactly what you need in order to make a living as a comic-strip artist. I reproduced page after page of artwork by artists such as Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons, Colin Wilson, Frank Hampson, and -of course- Don himself. And, boy, was he a hard task-master! He'd spot any inaccuracies I'd made in an instant; and he knew when I was slacking, or making excuses for lack-lustre work. He'd fix me with his withering stare, and I'd shrivel internally! As you've probably realised I was rather intimidated by Don, and by the challenge of meeting his approval. He could be brutally honest in his constructive criticism. My pride was quite often bruised by his harsh assessment of my progress. On a couple of occasions I was told that I was simply "bad at drawing", and in my youthful arrogance I wouldn't accept that this was true. I came to realise he was right, eventually... but it was a hard journey to the place where I could admit to my artistic failings. But I was a good worker, and I was determined to improve on my weaknesses, or work round them, and I think Don appreciated that.

At the same time he was teaching me, Don was also continuing to produce his own artwork for the Storm books. This was

At the same time he was teaching me, Don was also continuing to produce his own artwork for the Storm books. This was probably the most valuable aspect of my year with Don: I had the privilege to watch a true professional at the peak of his powers! He was working on Storm: The Twisted World at the time, some of his best work since the Trigan Empire, in my opinion. He was doing a page a week, at this point, which is an incredible rate when you consider the quality and the detail on those pages. I got to see him paint that incredible sequence where the train smashes through the brick wall, and I kept saying: "You're not really going to paint every single, individual brick are you?" And to his credit he did. He could have "fudged it", hidden the wall in shadow or behind a pillar, or made the wall impressionistic. But no: he went for it, whole-heartedly! Every single brick! On the subject of detail, he'd always tell me: "Give the reader something to go back and look at after they've read the story." Probably the one piece of advice I paid the most attention to. It's the little details I love about Don's work; there's always something you hadn't noticed in previous readings.

I don't think I ever saw Don use any reference He'd just draw! I'd be looking at his work, thinking, " how the hell does he know what a horse look like?" Me, I'd have to get my camera, go up the local stables and take some reference shots. But Don would just draw. Surprisingly loose pencils, too. All the anatomy and perspective would be accurate, but his pencil line-work was incredibly light and expressionistic. All the shading and the tight detail was usually applied with the paints. Don was paying a lot of attention to the lighting on this story and he really wanted be innovative with his colouring, whilst staying faithful to what had gone before. I never detected an ounce of complacency in Don's make-up, despite the thirty-plus years he'd spent in the same profession. He was determined to surpass what he'd done before and constantly pushed himself ever harder in order to improve his own work. It's refreshing and inspiring to see a veteran of the industry like Don to remain so passionate about his craft. I know so many artists half Don's age who seem so jaded and cynical in comparison. Subsequently, he was modest enough to receive creative input from others, too, like his writer, Martin Lodewijk. A talented artist in his own right, Martin would often contribute his own ideas for lay-outs. Don even flattered me by asking for my thoughts on certain sequences in that story, and I was thrilled when he took my suggestions onboard. He displayed none of the ego or pretension you often find in artists with half his talent and fame.

During my year with Don, he took me out to a vast comic-strip convention in Holland. I was stunned to see just how much of a super-star he is abroad, his queues stretched for miles and he patiently sketched and signed for hours, and treated each fan courteously and attentively. Eventually, with Don's help, I'd built up a portfolio strong enough to get taken on the books of Don's old agent, Pat Kelleher at Temple-Rogers. I soon got commissions from 2000ad weekly, and then the really hard labour began. That wasn't the end of my relationship with Don, though. After an initial few years of working from home, I found the solitude of the job increasingly hard to take. To be honest, I still have a problem with that aspect. Don was kind enough to let me share his studio two days a week. I wasn't the only one, either. Ian Gibson spent time working in Don's studio during this period, and Liam Sharpe (who had been Don's apprentice for the year prior to mine) used to pop in on a regular basis. Don was also training his own son to become his assistant at this point, and it was amusing to see someone else get the Don Lawrence "school of hard knocks" treatment! I don't know if Don is aware just how much I appreciate the privilege of spending a year in his company, and the start he gave to my own career. Unbelievably, I've now been drawing comics professionally for fifteen years. I'm more passionate than ever about my career choice, and my drawing has improved considerably, too! I still visit him, occasionally (though, not as often as I should, mind) bringing my current work to see if it gets his seal of approval. I think he'll always be there, looking over my shoulder, telling me to do better. Unfortunately, Don has suffered a series of setbacks to his health, during these last few years, resulting in him being forced to retire from producing any further artwork

This is a loss to us all. But he remains upbeat, and seems to be enjoying his retirement and all the time he can spend reading, doing crosswords, playing with his cats and watching DVDs on his vast home entertainment unit! If anyone deserves to have the freedom to take it easy, it's got to be him, specially after the years of intense labour he put in on his comic-strip artwork

That time I spent under Don's tuition has taken on a golden, cinematic glow of nostalgia, with Pink Floyd's "Meddle" album as the soundtrack. I got the chance to indulge in all sorts of enlightening conversations with an extraordinary character, the like of which I'll probably never encounter again. I felt like Luke Skywalker to Don's Obi Wan Kenobi! I have become a devotee of Birmese cats thanks to the scores of them that laze around Don's beautiful cottage deep in the Sussex Downs. What I remember most is the glorious smell of Don's studio. It was an intoxicating blend of wood, tobacco, pot and paint. To this day, I'll occasionally catch a similar odour, and I'll instantly be transported back to those youthful days I spent as Don Lawrence's apprentice. -Chris Weston.

Next issue Chris looks at possibly Don Lawrence's' most fondly remembered and greatest work' THE TRIGAN EMPIRE!

"WELCOME TO YOUR FUTURE!"

WALTER DRAGONBUCKLE discusses the golden age art of 2000AD

They say comics aren't art.

'They', of course, are the faceless individuals who tell us what foods are good for us, when to put our clocks forwards and backwards an hour, what clothes we should wear to look like everyone else, what celebrities to hate, who to vote for in reality TV shows. Joe Public? He wouldn't know real art from a hole in the ground.

'Real' art is DaVinci and Rembrandt, Picasso and Warhol. Melting clocks and three-faced women – that's art. Half a sheep floating in formaldehyde and some guy's excrement on a bed – that's art. A huge triple image of Superman on canvas and a painting of a comic-book panel – that's art. Comic art itself isn't art.

Even those who worked within the industry would say they were illustrators if pressed for their occupation at parties, then they would quickly change the subject. Charles Schultz, creator of *Peanuts* and arguably one of the world's greatest cartoonists, saw his work as a profession, nothing more. The funny books were meant to be read, then quickly forgotten. How could anything so impermanent dare to transcend the barrier of the printed page and call itself art?

In 1950's America, when comics got too uppity, too creative, 'they' put them in their place with a set of draconian rules that almost ended the medium completely. Fortunately, comics bounced back, but were never accepted as art. It was as if once the work was reproduced, its worth was sucked out of it by the printing presses. It ceased to be of any value. Pages of Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant* artwork were once used to catch paint drips at a newspaper syndicate's office.

More often than not, publishing houses didn't have the storage facilities for the pages anyway. It never occurred to them that the creator might want his work back. Famed *Batman* artist of the 1970's, Neal Adams, was regarded as something of a maverick when he campaigned for creators' rights and the return of original works to the artist. He tells of a time when he almost throttled an employee of a certain publisher he caught cutting up original art so it would fit in the trashcan. The employee was only following orders: the publishing companies owned the work after they paid for it, and they could do with it whatever they damn well pleased. Threatening to kill a guy for cutting up original comic art was just crazy.

British publishers weren't any better. The anti-comics fervour of the McCarthy era '50's America crossed the Atlantic. A flat page rate was paid to artists, no matter how many times their work was published. Artists weren't allowed to sign their work, let alone receive credit for it. The work belonged to the publisher, and it was worthless in itself; worth less than the paper it was drawn on.

The late 1970's saw Britain in a furore over the ultra-violent comic *Action*, which was dubbed 'the seven penny nightmare' by the philanthropic tabloid press. *Action* suffered the same fate as its American *EC* cousins from twenty years previously and became a pitiful shadow of its former self before disappearing completely. This was the climate in which the new science-fiction anthology comic *2000AD* was launched in February 1977.

Like hundreds of thousands of other kids, I responded to the TV advertising campaign that accompanied the new comic's launch. "Get me *2000AD*," I commanded my older sister. (I never was much good with numbers.) I remember when the pristine copy of *2000AD* programme one landed in my grime-encrusted hands with that indescribable just-printed smell emanating from it. I ripped the free Space Spinner off the cover, leaving a little tear in the cheap newsprint paper. My heart pounded as I quickly scanned the black and white interior, all 32 pages of it. I had never seen such magnificent drawings. A chill coursed up and down my spine as my incredulous eyes took in cowboys fighting dinosaurs, men playing football in the air, a Steve Austin doppelganger, a scary army invading Britain, and a space-man nearly getting sucked into Jupiter. The back cover even had a brain in a

jar. Once I'd read the whole comic, I noticed an advert proclaiming that next week I'd meet someone called 'Judge Dredd'. Sweet Baby Jesus, don't tell me there was MORE of this stuff next week! All this for only 8p 'Earth Money'! Even I could afford that!

I had to wait a full seven days for prog 2 to come out. My free Space Spinner from prog 1 was now just a hazy memory, lodged in my next door neighbour's guttering The free gift this week was a set of stickers that would turn me into a 'biotronic' man, and would in due course, remove what little hair grew on my arms. Prog 2 introduced *Judge Dredd*, completing the weekly line-up of strips for the foreseeable future. Dredd was the most frightening character I'd ever come across in my seven-year lifetime. Here was a man apparently on the side of law and order who locked up or shot people for committing very small crimes, like littering or graffiti. If he came round where I lived, *everybody* would be locked up He was a nightmarish father figure who took no crap from anybody, and he terrified me.

These worlds, these characters were given to me each and every week, for mere pennies. Unlike television, I didn't have to sit at a designated time to be told these stories as I could read them when I liked. I didn't have to tell my sisters to keep quet, as I could go to my room and read in peace.

I didn't miss any good bits because I could read them as quickly or as slowly or as many times as I wanted. I could carry the stories around with me or read them on long car journeys. The characters even had my voice! You couldn't do that with television.

Best of all, I copied the array of stunning pictures. I made up my own stories with the *2000AD* characters as the heroes. The amazing artwork grabbed you by the throat and pulled you right into the story. Sometimes it had a raw, kinetic quality, almost like the artist had thrown the ink down on the paper. Other times, the art was virtually photographic – so real it was scary I never really thought about who did the drawings – I just thought they sort of appeared. It turned out that the artwork was produced by robots under the baleful command of the alien editor, Tharg the Mighty. Small wonder it was so good – no human artist could ever come close to this.

The funny thing was I never held onto my progs for long. When I was finished with them, I gave them away to friends and cousins. This may seem strange to the mylar poly-bagging generation of collectors today, but I read comics because I loved the stories, the artwork and the experience, and I wanted to share that experience with others. Collecting comics was a phenomenon I'd never heard of.

ABOVE: Frank Hart gatecrashes a wedding reception in THE VISIBLE MAN, art by Montero, in Prog 51

As I continued to feed off my weekly dose of thrill-power, it soon became apparent that those same art robots actually had ordinary-sounding names like 'Brian Bolland' and 'Dave Gibbons'. There were other stranger names like 'Belardinelli' and 'Ezquerra' as well, and their work reflected their exotic monikers. As I grew older, I realised that maybe these weren't robots at all, but real people. I began to look at the work with a more critical eye, often discussing the weekly *Rogue Trooper* or *Judge Dredd* episode with like-minded friends at school. I began to hold onto my progs, storing them away in cardboard boxes for future re-reading.

For my money, *2000AD* was way better than its American counterparts, whose total output seemed to amount to nothing more than men in tights punching each other's lights out. *2000AD's* stories were more realistic, as most of the characters didn't possess any special powers to get them out of tight spots. They relied on their wits and cunning, and more often than not, a big mother of a gun. The artwork, although mostly black and white, packed a more powerful punch, with dynamic layouts, dramatic lighting effects and powerful storytelling. It was grittier, more vibrant and more exciting. Characters actually died in the stories, and stayed dead. Readers were never talked down to, and their loyalty was rewarded week after week with stories full of wry humour and stunning visuals. Most American comics were sanitised, factory-produced lifeless efforts that lacked any real soul, despite being printed in full colour. When *2000AD* achieved cult-status throughout its golden age of the early 1980's, American publishers suddenly began to look interested in the array of British talent the comic nurtured.

To me, and to many other thousands of Squaxx Dek Thargo, the art in *2000AD* produced a visceral reaction, more so than by DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*. There's just something about the sight of screaming cowboys dangling from the slavering maw of a deranged one-eyed dinosaur that appeals to me. Dictionaries define art as human creativity, the making of things that have form and beauty. It would seem that beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder, a fact that the critics of comic art seem to confuse with the subject matter. More often than not, *2000AD's* anti-heroes are ugly and do ugly things to each other, but to examine the content without considering the form is to do the medium a grave injustice.

Comic artists must take into account all the same considerations as fine artists when creating their work, only more so. The average comic page contains six panels, all of which must be composed harmoniously on the page, allowing them to interact with each other. Then of course the panels themselves are miniature compositions that must not only be aesthetically pleasing in themselves, but must also direct the reader's eye along to the next panel to allow for smooth storytelling. The average comic artist must have a firm grasp of human anatomy, physiology and sociology (as well as that of animals, aliens, robots or anything else his imagination can conjure up). He must also totally comprehend the

LEFT: INVASION- Bill Savage resists the Volgan invasion of Britain in 1999, art by J Clough from Prog 51.

Newspaper articles on the subject of comics invariably contain sound effects like POW! and BOOM! in their accompanying illustrations. The articles themselves are usually peppered with puerile references and inaccurate information. Most people still associate comics with childhood, something to grow out of. Many people enjoy reading comics, but only in private – never on the train or the bus, like they're something to be ashamed of.

I'm not about to suggest that all comic art is great any more than all conventional art is great, merely that comic art deserves wider recognition than it currently receives, and what it received in the past. The graphic narrative that is comics, with its unique verbal-visual blending, is a versatile artform capable of more subtle storytelling than cinema or television, and can have more impact than a prose novel To say comic art is

not true art is an insult to the pioneers of the medium, to those who stayed working in the industry even though they were accused of being subversives and malingerers, and to those masterful auteurs who poured their hearts and souls into their work to produce truly outstanding works of art.

But what about the art of *2000AD*? It has, after all, kept Squaxx Dek Thargo enthralled for over 25 years. It has cultivated some of the world's top comic talent and produced thousands of pages of incredible science-fiction. The Galaxy's Greatest Comic has created some of the most popular and enduring popular culture icons of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. If comics are indeed art, then *2000AD* is no ordinary comic. Judge for yourself – what do 'they' know?

- Walther Dragonbuckle

principles of perspective, foreshortening, composition, colour, light and shade. He must be able to convincingly depict cars, spaceships, birds, ships, clouds, tables, dank underground caverns, starfields and landscapes. He must understand mechanics and how things move and work, in order to convey movement in an otherwise static medium. He has to be able to act, to a certain degree, in order to imbue his creations with emotion and vivacity. He is the director, cinematographer, producer, set and costume designer, and in many cases the writer as well. He has to accomplish this for panel after panel, and all within the strict confines of a deadline, week in, week out.

The writers of stories are often the unsung heroes of comics, for without them there would be no stories to illustrate. It's much easier to wow people by showing them a page of stunning artwork than it is by showing them the script from which the page was derived. Also, comics are a unique blend of the visual and verbal, one complementing the other. To talk about comic art without considering the writers whose concepts, characters, dialogue and descriptions are the initial inspiration for the artist's renderings would be neglecting a vital aspect of the art as a whole

The letterers who embellish the finished works with their word balloons, thought bubbles and sound effects are also often neglected when comic art is discussed. It is possible to ruin brilliant artwork with bad lettering, just as it is possible to enhance bad art with good lettering. *2000AD* was one of the first British comics to embrace hand lettering, deeming it to be more attractive and less mechanical looking than typeset lettering. The comic's letterers take their craft very seriously, and have produced some memorable effects for the various stories over the years. Again, no work on comic art would be complete without discussing their invaluable contribution.

In recent years, comic art has come to be appreciated by more people, especially fans and those within the industry. With art now being returned to the artist from the publisher, more artists are now able to sell their originals, and some works fetch high prices on the Internet. However, interest in comic artwork is still marginalised. Mainstream media take only a passing interest in the occasional newsworthy story

Remember the classics of yesteryear? Remember the newsprint titles you grew up on? The homes of CHARLIE'S WAR, DOOMLORD, RO-BUSTERS and BILLY'S BOOTS? Their time might have past, but they should never be forgotten. REDEYE is looking for contributors to write retrospectives on the greats of British comics past. EAGLE, VICTOR, BATTLE, ACTION, STARLORD, TORNADO, LOOK AND LEARN, and the many others that once filled the shelves

Contact the editor with a proposal and title you wish to research and start dusting off those memories.

AGENT
JET BLACK.

FRIEND
OR
FOE?

OPERATION
BLACK JET

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:Panelogy

To B5 or not to B5?

That is going to be the question regarding format. In recent years, I've noticed a trend in the small press scene to opt for the US sized comic-book format and, though I do miss the old style British comics, I believe it to be a logical step. I've long advocated using any means to infiltrate the mainstream and the key tool is to masquerade as a professional, which, assuming your work is half decent, is about presentation and marketing. It's quite likely that a fair number of small press creators just like the idea of producing their stuff in a format that they are very fond of. The added bonus is that their wares can sit, fairly comfortably, alongside the Marvel, DC and Dark Horse publications.

From that foray into respectability, great things can emerge. Dave Sim, creator of 'Cerebus the Aardvark' is a good example of a small press / indie creator made good, more recently Paul Grist with his award winning 'Jack Staff', originally self - published and now released through 'Image Comics' Those fellows didn't rely on their obvious comics skills alone, they presented their work in a format acceptable enough to for the casual comics reader to at least pick up and check out. If your strip is black and white interiors, wrapped in a colour cover and in US proportions, then you are in a position to take on the likes of Oni, Slave Labour and even the likes of Frank Miller's 'Sin City'.

There are plenty of writers and artists, in the small press community, perfectly capable of re-energising the UK comics industry – but most appear to be bashing away in relative obscurity.

I recently wrote a piece that, in a nutshell, claimed that 2000 AD's days were numbered and, despite my fondness for the late 70's and early 80's era of the comic, I couldn't give a monkey's.

One or two of you (most likely reading this now), challenged my view point, emphasising how Tharg and co. represented a last hope for UK comics and the army of hopeful would be script and art droids (sorry - and lettering droids). I accept that I was a little hasty in gleefully rubbing my hands together and hissing 'eehhxcellent', but I'm a little disappointed at the lack of development from the 2000 AD stable over the years. Rebellion's latest offering sounds yawn-makingly uninspiring. A quarterly themed anthology reprinting hard to find classics. The key word here is 'reprinting'. Is it beyond the likes of Rebellion to come up with a new anthology that doesn't feature any 2000 AD related material? 'Darkies Mob' doesn't count, refer to the aforementioned keyword.

I've come to the conclusion that 2000 AD doesn't need to die, as such, it - and the Megazine - just need some serious competition in the shape of an anthology weekly and/or monthly. Before any smart - arses ask what-exactly-am-I-doing-about-it? Well, all I can say is I'm working on it, but whilst I am, here are a few suggestions.

Firstly, not all kids are slack jawed cretins, motivated by X-Box, DVD, flashing lights, fucking idiots on the TV and shiny stuff in general. So, unlike most media, we do not need to treat them as such. There are the football fanatics, the army cadets, the aspirant scientists, artists, writers, coppers, athletes actors and another list as long as your arm. When I was a kid, super-heroes

were OK, but not the be-all-and-end-all. I had options like sampling one of a dozen humour titles, a couple of war comics, ditto sport and science fiction. 'Tornado', for me, is an example that springs to mind. I remember 'Tornado' being referred to as 'crap' by an ex-Tharg, way back at the dawn of the 80's in a popular fanzine of the time 'Bem' - edited by Martin Lock.

"There are plenty of writers and artists, in the small press community...but most appear to be bashing away in relative obscurity"

'Crap'- I thought was more than harsh. There was a good mix of stories ranging from 'Blackhawk' - about a Nubian that makes a name for himself in the Roman Army, to 'The Mind of Wolfie Smith'- which wasn't about a 70's revolutionary in Tooting, but a young man with frighteningly powerful psychic abilities. You could use 'Tornado' as a template for a modern anthology and by adding a sport strip, a British army themed story and detective story we would have a worthy contender for 2000 AD's title.

Another vital factor in any new magazine's or comic's survival is that of distribution. How many of you had to hunt high and low to get hold of 'Tripwire'? Yep, me too. I was working at a store on the Manchester University campus and I asked the newsagent- lady if she had heard of it. To my surprise she had and promptly ordered me the most recent issue. I was given another assignment, work-wise, but still needed to keep an eye on things at the Uni store, so I requested 'Tripwire' as a regular order from the same newsagents. After several visits to see if my magazine had arrived, the lady told me that it had ceased publication. As I trudged dejectedly away I thought, ' No wonder, the only way any bleeder can read it is if they place a special order like me'. I believe there were some other shenanigans that impeded 'Tripwire' and it's journey to the shelves alongside SFX and 'Dreamwatch', but it's general lack of exposure must have surely contributed to it's (temporary?) demise

For small pressers, the first- and most obvious - choice is Shane Chebsy's 'SMALLZONE' which does an exemplary job in providing a one stop shop for any one wishing to purchase small press comics via the Internet. The next logical step would be some form of distributing to the comics shops and beyond that, the news-trade.

Interestingly, the most critically acclaimed small press comic of the moment, namely 'The O Men' by Martin Eden, is a cheerfully basic A5 black and white affair, as is my personal fave 'Doctor Sponge' by Chris Askham (art left). Both titles would seem to contradict my argument, though I suspect these to be exceptions to the rule, as they are produced by talent that will obviously succeed at a much higher level in years to come. In other words - content may well emerge in time, whatever the packaging

I don't believe it should ever be a case of style over content, though both would be nice.

CHRIS ATKINS is editor and writer of the SF REVOLUTION publications, and champion of UK Comics.

Girly Goodness

SEEDLINGS
THE SPIRITS WERE QUIET THE MORNING THE HUNTERS LEFT.
Written by Amanda Kear
Art by Ed Traquino
MY TOTEM OFFERED NO VISIONS THAT DAY
NO WARNING THAT GRANDFATHER AUROCHS MIGHT DEMAND
NO SIGN TO FORETELL DANGER
...BLOOD FOR B

MORE GIRL TALK

Following on from their success at the Bristol Comics Festival in June, where they premiered #3 of The Girly Comic and came 4th in the running for the National Comics Award for Best Independent Comic (behind the likes of Roger Langridge and Paul Grist!), the team behind THE GIRLY COMIC will be bringing you more girly goodness at the London Winter Festival on Nov 1st

Says Editor Selina Lock "Issue 4 is wrapped in a gorgeous cover by one of the finest gentlemen in comics: Mike Collins. It also features more work by the award-winning creator of Inner City Pagan: Lee Kennedy, who maintains her unbroken run of appearances in The Girly Comic, and is a treat not to be missed. For another example of Girly Comic strips then also check out the page of Seedlings by Dr Bob and Ed Traquino (left)."

THE GIRLY COMIC is not the only work from the Factor Fiction stable. Also released is Issue 2 of weird crime and horror anthology comic 'KissKiss BangBang'. Featuring another Tale of the Malleus from the pen of Jay Eales and a brand new Doctor Sorrow story by Ady Kermode and Mike Juniper, on loan from his own title, one of the hits of Bristol 2003. Selina adds: "We're always on the lookout for new talent to add to the Factor Fiction roster, so for ordering details or to submit your work get in touch with: Selina Lock (selina.lock@ntlworld.com), 38 Clarkes Road, Wigston, LE18 2BE or check out the Factor Fiction website: http://www.factorfictionpress.co.uk.

ABOVE: Art from DEVIANTS by BJR, FROM FUSION 1 SPECIAL EDITION

Hives of scum and villainy?

ALAN DONALD of THE PANEL, a former retailer turned regular columnist at silverbulletcomics.com, asks what makes and breaks a modern day comic shop?

What makes a good comicbook shop?

This is a difficult question. Fundamentally speaking a good comicbook shop is one that manages to stay open for more than 3 years or so. Comic retailing is not an easy affair for many reasons. On the business side you've got a product that is far too expensive for what you get yet it cost so little you need to sell a great many to make money. There is one bonus for retailers as comicbooks are classified as reading materials and are therefore free from VAT. Of course this break doesn't make a great deal of difference when you take into account all the overheads that even a small shop incurs. Rent, Council Tax, Water, Electric, Telephone, Insurance etc, they all add up very quickly.

Then of course there is Diamond, the monopoly holding distributor of mainstream comics. With Diamond you have to order 2-3 months in advance (to be sure of getting anything like the amount you ordered) and when you start up you have to pay up front. This means

a) You have to pay for 2-3 months worth of goods before you will see a return on even the first batch you ordered.

b) Once established you have to try and predict retail trends months in advance meaning either:

i) Ordering too little and risking customer dissatisfaction. ii) Ordering too much and risking wasting money.

Of course this is just the tip of the iceberg. Like any retail shop you need to make it attractive, you need to know your product inside out, you've got to have a very, very good business sense, you've got to be friendly, personable and a good sales person.

On the whole a comic shop will start with a fresh clean slate. You will find former collectors or customers from other shops that will join you but more often than not you will need to educate your customers, find a product that will suit them and gradually introduce them to more.

Get all that right and you'll have a successful comicbook shop but it may be stale and sterile. Get a few of them right and you'll have a fantastic shop people will love and talk about for years after you've gone out of business.

So how does one strike a balance and turn a successful comicbook shop into a great shop? I feel the answer lies with the short-lived shops that really make waves and become part of comicbook fan lore.

To begin with the business side of things must be a top priority but once the business is stable, solid and with a good regular income things that would have been risks for a less well established shop can be done without a problem. There are many things that I feel make a truly great shop, measure them against your local retailer and see how it compares:

1) Back Issues, a good selection from a wide range of eras and titles.

2) Staff. All the staff should know the regular customers, their likes, dislikes, their family, their jobs, everything. All the staff should know about every comic on the shelves

3) Service. Weekly comics without fail. Every comic a customer orders without fail. Any comics a customer might like based on their past preferences put by for them just in case they want them but they shouldn't feel

forced into buying them. Service should always be very friendly with time taken to talk to new and established customers getting to know them and what they like and dislike.

4) Atmosphere. The shop should be a venue, somewhere to meet up with people, chat, buy comics and chill. The shop's atmosphere should be as inclusive and friendly as possible.

5) Stock. There should be as wide a range of new comicbooks in stock as is possible in good quantities. These should include as many Small Press comics as the retailer can put his or her hands on. Comic books should dominate and not be tucked away in a corner but there can be a wide range of other areas of stock too. Action Figures, posters, T-shirts, original art, prints, cheap comicbooks, Dynamic Forces comics and so on add to the shop but they shouldn't take over.

6) Information. The retailer and their staff should be up on comicbook news and creator changes etc. They should know and talk about new products coming in Previews (and from Small Press). All of this could be presented in a newsletter.

7) Signings. Retailers should do what they can to get creators along for signing and sketching sessions as a thank you to their customers.

Red Eye wants your comicbook shop reviews, what was the best shop you can remember from your past? What do you think of the comicbook shops in your area? Get writing now.

To get the ball rolling I've spoken to a few people across the industry about their thoughts on the subject. Our panellists are, Kev F Sutherland (organiser of the UK Comicbook Festival), Matt Boker (owner/manager of AUTOMATIC COMICS), Glenn Carter (Comic fan and writer of 'The Real Mainstream' on SBC) and Rich Naim (writer/artist of 'Dr Ripper's Multiplex').

AD: What was your first experience of a comicbook shop, what did you think?

Kev: It was 1976 and my mate Steve had moved to Bristol. He took me to Forever People, which was the first comic shop I had ever seen, indeed it was one of the first in the country. I was mindboggled, and was quite literally like a kid in a sweetshop. Apart from the sweets bit. As I recall I bought the Howard The Duck Annual (my first discovery of Import comics - back then you got most US Marvels in the newsagent) and Jim Steranko's Chandler. I still have both, naturally.

Glenn: It was Wonderworld in Bournemouth - I got into Groo the Wanderer in a big way and was seeking out the back issues. I was a little daunted by it actually - so many titles, but I liked the way that comic shops at the time kept a lot of back issues...I miss that aspect of them, actually.

Rich: I didn't first visit a comic shop until I was about 18. This was when I was at art college and wanted to look at artwork that didnt involve putting a dog turd on the wall and calling it "art". I was drawn in by a copy of Bone no.1 in the window. When I saw the boxes of comics where you couldn't see the comic covers like little filing cabinets, I found it intimidating that people knew exactly what they were after without looking at the artwork - a world of obsessive collectors seemed a little strange to me.

Matt: Forbidden Planet Cardiff aged 8/9 picked up some US import Turtles comics from Mirage.. was amazed by the shop.. so much cool stuff it blew me away.

AD: What, for you makes a good comicbook shop?

Kev: A shop that sells comics, and is welcoming to new customers, first time buyers, strangers, children and women. There is nothing big or clever about being the Comic Shop Guy from The Simpsons (but there are a lot of them around). Good comics, and friendly, helpful service. Page 45 in Nottingham is exemplary. There's one in the area I now live where some staff can be a tad on the bored side. I heard them telling one kid recently "oh you don't want to buy that, it's rubbish". !?

Glenn: Rapport with customers, range of titles, having the courage to back indy titles.

Rich: Generally, any shop that stocks Pantomime Press is really good... ahem, sorry. No, it's nice to see a good variation of small press, independent and mainstream comics. Plus, I would always rather see someone who has a bit of life and knowledge behind the counter rather than someone picking their nose who only has one word in their vocabulary - "wot?" For me personally, (someone who enjoys freaky comics) I like a shop that displays a diverse range of merchandise. If the shop owner is able to direct me to something really different that inspires me I'm very happy and will visit again. Also, I don't like it if the owners/staff simply assume you know everything there is to know about comics, some of us only know the stuff we enjoy after all.

Matt: Good layout and varied choice not just Marvel and DC comics, Knowlegeable staff. I read 30-50 comics a week and I would expect any comic shop register jockey to do the same, I like to know what I am selling. I also read Wizard and many comics and toy websites to know what's what and be able to highlight things of interest to my customers. I like to give the personal touch and get to know customers

AD: Which comicbook shops that you've visited were your most and least favourite and why?

Kev: Favourite for many years was Forever People in Bristol (I moved here myself in 1989) until its sad demise in 1999, just months before the first Comic Festival. My least favourite, and it's not much of a complaint, is one that I shan't name in Leicester which, unless it's changed in the last year or so, has blocked off its upstairs windows without installing air conditioning and thus is unbearably hot and smells of socks.

Glenn: Hmm, Opal city comics in Norwich is disappointing - its just some cardboard boxes with a couple of old Spiderman's in - not a proper comic shop at all. (That said Abstract Sprocket in Norwich is really good). My favourite was Forbidden Planet on Oxford Street - wow! such a range – I could spend all day in there.

Rich: Even though it's a bit awkward to get to from where I live, I visited Gosh! in London last year and thought it was probably my favourite so far It had a nice varied selection of comics and plenty of room to look around, rather than tight spaces where you have to squeeze past sweaty customers. My least favourite would have to be this place I went to in Rochester, Kent. I went in looking for horror comics and the guy started suggesting I read all these porn comics. He had no idea The place isn't there any more, what does that tell you?

Matt: Gosh in London is a fave of mine Nice staff good choice and great layout. David's in Brighton has a huge selection and amazing prices, been shopping there for 10 years, always pop in when I am down that way Non-faves? Forbidden Planets ... they have become a toy shop and lost the thread on the whole comics thing.. some stores the staff just want your cash and don't have an opinion...

"...Knowlegeable staff. I read 30-50 comics a week and I would expect any comic shop register jockey to do the same..."

ABOVE: Art from TRUTHSERUM by JONATHON ADAMS
NEXT PAGE: Art from JACK STAFF by PAUL GRIST

AD: What do you think of the Indy comic scene in the UK?

Kev: Outside of the Comic Festival and Caption, I'm not sure there's enough of an infrastructure for spreading the word about them. I certainly don't hear about enough indy stuff in, say, Comics International enough. Maybe I don't look hard enough.

Glenn: At the moment there are MAJOR problems with distribution for indies here and a general lack of exposure. Despite this the scene seems to be getting bigger - which is encouraging.

Rich: I love it. I don't think I know a group of people more friendly than Independent comic creators. When I first got involved I was amazed at the diversity and quality of work being created. Over the last few years, it seems to me that the UK scene has grown immensely and I think more and more people are beginning to sit up and take notice.

AD: Have you got a favourite Indy comic at the moment?

Kev: I love Jack Staff, if that's still indy. And there was a whole host of stuff at Ladyfest's Comic Queens exhibition in Bristol recently that was sensational. I particularly like Jonathan Edwards stuff, if he's still doing it, and Roger Langridge is a comedy comics god.

Glenn: The Mice by Roger Mason, Bear by Jamie Smart, Springheeled Jack by David Hitchcock and Thrud the Barbarian by Carl Critchlow. I'm also partial to SIP and Cerebus.

Rich: There really is so much out there it's hard to decide. I came across some amazing stuff at Bristol this year, some of which I still have to get through. Probably the most memorable out of the ones I have read was a little small press comic I came across called "Fleep". It was all set in a phone box where this little guy is trying to work out who he is and why he cannot escape from the box.

How the writer managed to sustain an interesting story set entirely in 2 square feet had me fascinated.

Matt: DOGWITCH! It rocks and Dan is such a nice bloke.. and ohh yeah I do the UKmail order for it! Also a fan of much Slave Labour, TEENAGER FROM MARS, STRAY BULLETS and hundreds of others! Non-Diamond Indy I enjoy Rat Arsed and Shit Faced, Thrud, those two rock !

AD: Do you think that comicbook shops do enough to help Indy publishers?

Kev: They're not charities, unfortunately, and they have enough of a job shifting mainstream titles. If there was any way indies could help themselves, through co-operative printing and distribution – and publicity in particular - that would be good. I have a dream of a freebie comic, distributed in the same way as The Big Issue. That's one way I see forward for indy comic creation, but it'd take a hell of a lot of doing.

Glenn: Some do go to extraordinary lengths to promote and sell indy publishers. There are some problems though and many comic shops won't touch them.

Matt: Stock the books!

Rich: No. Sorry to be so blunt I find that whereas most of the smaller shops can be really helpful in stocking indy comics and giving advice, others, most often larger chains, can be downright rude. It's fair enough not wanting to stock the comics but the looks and replies you can get can be downright venomous. Those who do, and there are many, should give themselves a pat on the back. Those who don't should give themselves an enema.

AD: Do you think there is anything Indy publishers can do to increase their attractiveness to retailers?

"At the moment there are *MAJOR* problems with distribution for indies here and a general lack of exposure..."

Kev: Look outside of comic shops. Approach record shops, fashion stores, independent card shops, pubs, bars, universities, and ask if they'll take titles on a sale or return basis, or let you sell them on gig nights. That's how Viz started, and it's a realistic way small press and indy comics could get themselves seen and bought. Offer your strips for free, on a trial basis, to a local paper, or student paper, or freesheet. Take a market stall somewhere other than a comic mart - Camden Lock, Portobello Road, Islington, Hampstead (sorry, all a bit London there), your local car boot, your local town centre. Get all your fellow indy publishers to join you, and stack your comics high and sell them cheap. In bursts like that you could cover your losses and build your market.

Glenn: Offer sale or return. Have good quality covers even if the paper inside is awful. Try to print them on Comic book sized paper - most of their shelves are designed for that size. Ensure the comic comes out regularly and more importantly when you say it will.

Rich: Politeness and confidence. I think you need to visit them in person, explain what you do but try not to sound like you're force feeding them. I've tried in the past sending examples of comics with a reply slip that needs ticking along with an sae, but they don't seem to like that and don't bother to reply. I find that they prefer to meet you to see if you have a nervous twitch or a severed hand in your pocket before they feel they can trust you

Matt: Yeah offer sale or return. and follow it up ! I have had a few batches of sale or return from uk indy peeps and then lost my end of the paper work and the publisher has never made contact again. Carl Critchlow does a great job with Thrud... In my store it has sold as many copies per issue as Amazing Spiderman!

Thanks to Kev, Glenn, Rich and Matt for taking time out to answer these questions.

In the next issue of REDEYE we'll be asking more punters their raves and faves of comic shops across the country. Where will the secret army of mystery shoppers visit next?

A Walk in August

AND HERE'S SOMEWHERE IN SPACES IN CAMDEN TOWN ONE OF ENDING MANY HEARTS THIS ONE ON AN ALTERNATIVE BEAT
CAMDEN TOW
AND IT'S A BEAT OF YOUTH, OF ENERGY
IT'S THE PLACE YOU HATE YOUR PARENTS DON'T APPROVE OF
BALLROOM

GREY SKY

Grey Sky is a biannual self-published anthology of dark and challenging tales from writer and artist Sean Azzopardi, featuring contributions from a selection of the best and most talented new writers. The third issue, available this November, contains the first chapters of new ongoing stories 'Flesheater' and 'Vented', and the first installment of 'Take A Walk With Me In August', with writer Alasdair Watson

Set in a future version of London that's saturated with rot and decay, Flesheater delves into an underworld of secret operations, snuff movies and the walking dead.

Take a Walk with Me in August is a love letter to London, taking the form of a series of six-page monologues. The first provides a high-speed run through the mental topography of Camden, delivered by a nameless narrator.

In Vented, we visit a block of flats where every resident has a story to tell, and the porter has a distinctly strained relationship with reality

Grey Sky #3 will be available at the London Comic Festival, £2.50 (40pp, b&w, colour cover). For further information, and for previews of the series, please visit: www.phatcatz.org.uk

Postcog

INCORPORATING TRS2

HOW'S THIS WORKING THEN?
POSTCOG is the extensive review section for REDEYE, featuring many different reviews of UK and Irish titles from a variety of rotating sources, from RED EYE staffers, emailed contributions, and established resources like TRS2.

WHAT IS TRS2?
The Review Sheet, now in its second incamation is both a website, part of the BUGPOWDER network and a printed resource for reviews of sp comics, now also at home here in RED EYE. TRS2 reviews are distinctively labelled as such and are presented uncut from the site. All reviews are the sole opinions of the author of that post, and not of REDEYE itself.

WASN'T THERE A SIMILAR THING CALLED TRS YEARS AGO?
Yes. Pete did the same thing in the mid 90s before moving on to do BugPowder. Andy saw a need and resurrected it. Then Jez picked it up after that. Andy and Jez are responsible for the whole setup while Pete maintains the site. RED EYE's Red Baz sent a few emails and now its here.

WHO ARE THE REVIEWERS?
The reviewing team for TRS2 consists of Andy Luke (ALu), John Robbins (JR), Mardou (MAR), Jez Higgins (JH), Gary Northfield (GN), Richard Barr (RB) and Pete Ashton (PA). Other independent reviewers are Gary Johnston.

HOW DO I GET MY BOOK REVIEWED IN POSTCOG?
Send a sample copy of your comic to the editorial address in the front of the mag with full details and sae, or to be reviewed online for TRS2, go to their website for more information.

SOCIETY: PART ANIMAL 1 & 2
Posted by Jez Higgins, TRS2

Society, Brian Yuzna's 1989 film and still his career high water mark, is something of an overlooked gem. It looks like a straight ahead teen horror flick, but gently pulls you into its uneasy queasy setting, ultimately delivering a pretty sharp satire of Reagan-era America.

Society: Party Animal is the 2003 comics sequel to that film. It picks up Billy, the film's hero, 10 years on. He's been on the run, fighting Society wherever he found it, writing up his exploits on websites and phoning in to radio talk shows. In Party Animal, he's drawn back into Society, discovers the truth about himself, a splats a big blobby pile of flesh into pieces. Good fun stuff.

The story doesn't attempt to pull the Reaganomics satire into the 21st century, which is probably a good thing. Reaganomics, like ra-ra skirts and Woodpecker cider, is the stuff of 80s nite at your local nite-spot. Trouble is, it doesn't really replace it with anything - all we have is a straight ahead story of capture, escape, capture, discovery, big blobs of flesh and escape. It does what it does well, but it all just seemed a bit thin. Perhaps a greater length would have allowed for more depth, but I'm guessing there are economic factors at work here too

Physically these are well presented comics - rather good painted covers, colour interiors (good colouring too), American size. Unfortunately the art and lettering teams change between issues. Unfortunate not because the art in either is radically better or worse than the other, but because the styles are very different and this jars rather.

There's a second Society mini-series in the works. Having re-established the characters, I'm crossing my fingers that it'll do a bit more with them.
Both issues available at £3.45 each (inc p&p) from Rough Cut Comics, 129 Langmuirhead Road, Glasgow, G66 5DL or online at the Rough Cut Comics website See website for US$ and Euro pricing and shipping

FREAKSHOW 1
Posted by John Roberts

Atomic Diner's third title lacks the charm of *In Dublin City* and is without the finesse of *Naked Lunch*, but does offer a brash, ballsy appeal that should sate the *between meals* appetite of fans of hard-boiled detective fiction. Be prepared to pile on the weight, though - Freakshow is a thirty-five issue maxi series! (Hark! Does the death knell sound so early?)

Set in America during the 1950's, Freakshow #1 echoes elements of *LA Confidential*, but in it's urgency to deliver a complete story with its premiere issue, provides a purely surface reading experience, and ends before one settles to what semblance of a mid-section of story the thing offers. However, the scripting of Rob Curley is crisp, the pace fast, and the dialogue ugly.

Equally ugly is an artwork over-stylised in a bid to lend sophistication to an inappropriately cartoonish look. Panels of penciler Terry Kenny and inker Lisa Jackson at times are without clarity and without subtlety of expression due to lack of variety in the weight of inked line; but conversely, pages are attractive, utilising inventive layouts and competent compositional use of black areas.

Room for improvement then, but with a sound enough story-telling, a solid draughtsmanship and a sequential know-how already in evidence, there is reason to believe that, given time, **Freakshow** could develop into a satisfying series. One hopes the death knell will fade. (The fact, anyway, that it exists only in my pessimistic head suggests it may well just be a case of tinnitus. Hurrah!)

Colour cover, 28 glossy pages, Euro 3.75/$2.95 from: Atomic Diner, 2 Exchequer Street, Dublin 2, Ireland. Email robatomicdiner@eircom.net and ask why it is that a publication printed in Ireland, at a time when the euro is stronger than the American dollar, should be priced so.

MBLEH! 2
Posted by Neill Cameron

MBLEH! is written, drawn and published by modern Irish renaissance man Bob Byrne. This is a man so confident in his talents that he thinks nothing of giving his comic a name that is basically unpronounceable and even if you can manage it, sounds a bit like someone being sick. Way to generate strong word-of-mouth!

Still, never mind. MBLEH! is a thoroughly enjoyable collection of stories from Byrne's singularly fecund imagination,

ranging from surrealist action-adventure to bitterly misanthropic autobiography. The disparate stories are bound together by a common tone of sleazily hallucinogenic bad taste, pitched somewhere between Gilbert Shelton's Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers and early Irvine Welsh; whilst there's not nearly so many explicit drug references, there's definitely an air of being on something. And not necessarily something good. Cockroaches wearing papier-mâché human masks, gangs of glue-addicted juvenile contract killers... it's all quite substantially messed up.

The absolute highlight of all this is the lead feature 'Clam Land', which features the ongoing adventures of the utterly perverted and morally corrupt Penzram, his insanely violent ice-cool-muthafucka pal Lucas, and his mentally-retarded coprophile infant nephew Herby in the colourful setting of Clamtown. Think Uncle Scrooge's Duckburg, but with more crack whores and bum rapists. Basically, this is one of the funniest things you're ever going to read, as long as you find jokes about AIDS and child mental illness funny. Which, clearly, I do. If you can see past the explicit violence and teddy-bear-fucking you will find a classic sitcom family structure, built around a central set of relationships that are really rather sweet.

So, yes. It's an excellent comic, and everyone should go and read it. If we lived in a world with any kind of natural justice, Bob Byrne would be as famous as.. oh, I don't know, Carol Vorderman. At least.
Issues 1 and 2 are available for 5 Euros (inc p& p) from: 43 Kilclare Gardens, Jobstown,Tallaght, Dublin 24, Ireland
Full ordering details and lots of fun stuff besides are to be found at www.clamnuts.com.

STURGEON WHITE MOSS #1
Posted by Pete Ashton

First issues are a funny thing, and this is no exception. Reading this I find myself veering between being impressed and disappointment. Impressed that a new UK anthology (by persons unknown to me, but that doesn't mean anything) can pull together international talent such as Aleksander Zorgaf, Mike Diana and Jeffrey Lewis, but disappointment at the rest of the package which doesn't quite seem to justify the beautiful production values

That said, it is a first issue, and first issues are always wanting for that little bit more. The second issue is out later this month and, judging by the content list alone, looks to be a natural improvement. Once the editors get on a roll this could easily be a **Scenes From The Inside** of our times.

At the end of the day, I don't want to be negative about this venture as it strikes me as something important, bringing a fresh perspective to the UK art-comics scene. There is good stuff in here but on the whole it's just *not quite there*. Maybe I just had too higher expectations.

Contributors: Aleksander Zograf, Alexander Tucker, DJ Troha, Jeffrey Lewis, Jo Ratcliffe, Jody Barton, Luke Caulfield, Mike Diana, Robert Montgomery, Sean Flynn. Sturgeon White Moss costs £5.00 from White Moss Press, 21 Warren Court, Euston Road, London, NW1 3AA, UK. I bought my copy at Gosh! in London.

Sturgeon White Moss #2
Posted by Pete Ashton

In the mid 1990s Scenes from the Inside was the landmark anthology of the UK art comics scene, showcasing the best home grown talent and linking it to work from overseas. Other anthologies had done this work before, notably Escape and Inkling, but in the past five years very little has come onto the scene. With Toenail Clippings from Ireland gaining international recognition it looked like we were onto a good thing, and, along with Sentence, **Sturgeon White Moss** looks to continue this trend

When I reviewed the first issue I wasn't sure if SWM would live up to my expectations. With this second issue I'm still not 100%, but I think this is more my unreasonable aspirations than failures on the part of the magazine itself.

What is an anthology for? No-one has ever given a satisfactory answer other than that they are a good thing. I like to think they act as markers in the emerging history of the scene or even the greater medium. They celebrate existing standards and give the up-and-coming creators something to aim for and supersede. The American anthology Non is a good recent example - established as a reaction against the status quo it became the establishment itself as the next generation of mini-comix kids reacted against it. But I digress.

Sturgeon White Moss excites me as a concept. While produced in London and with a strong UK contingent of cartoonists, it is edited by Sylvia Farago, a Canadian resident in this country, and from the outset pushed an international agenda. Most anthologies start local and, as they grow and develop contacts, gravitate to including other nationalities. It is perhaps a sign of maturity that Farago bypassed this stage and went straight for the world view.

As for the contents, like all anthologies it's a bit hit and miss, but more hit than miss in my view. There are some lovely pieces here - Jeffrey Lewis impresses again and Matt Abbiss makes good use of a larger canvas, and like all good anthologies there are many names here that are new to me. Overall it's a good package and worth the price tag. And then there's the Dave Cooper cover. That Farago can get one of the biggest names in US comix to grace her magazine on the second issue shows a seriousness of mission and indicated there are great things to come.
Sturgeon White Moss #2 - A4 48pg, col cvr. £4.99.

Sturgeon White Moss - 2
Posted by Mardou

"Come back when you are less weird." (Matt Abbiss, 'Bonter')
Sturgeon White Moss on it's second outing seems to have done just that. It's wittier, sharper and more coherent than the first issue, and has again managed to amass an impressive fistful of contributors

Amongst the highlights are Tom Gauld's winsome gem of a tale, 'Cat, Bear and Ghost', the supremely dapper 'Salem Brownstone' by John Dunning and Nik Singh, and Sophie Crumb's 'You Can't Please Everybody'. Though the latter doesn't quite seem to have found her voice it's an interesting piece (and surely raises the question, did Robert Crumb beget his daughter via Clonaid?)

Alexander Tucker's continued story 'Thou', which fit passably in Issue 1's basket of kookiness, seems out of place with the cooler, more well adjusted inmates showcased here. Still, there seems to be a lysergic thread binding the Sturgeon White Moss anthologies together....and that's no bad thing! Go buy, I reckon.
Sturgeon White Moss, Issue 2, £5.00 from 21 Warren Court, Euston Rd, London, NW1 3AA. www.whitemosspress.com

STURGEON WHITE MOSS 3
POSTED BY MARDOU

I like anthologies on the whole. They are an economic way of sampling lots of new artists and when the editing is well done they are a pleasure in themselves. A rummage through another person's knicker drawer, the functional, the fancy, the downright sluttish, all chosen by one choosy hand.

Sturgeon White Moss #3 does a fine job of avoiding a cramped 'Small Press attitude but instead makes straight for the Underground, which it truly is. Juxtaposing the work of established stars, such as the gorgeous sketch book pages by Charles Burns, with work by upcoming starlets (the awesome Jason Masters) and serialized stories (another instalment of Salem Brownstone) , there's not much here that disappoints. Saying that the 4 pages of scribble by Mat Brinkman left me feeling a bit short-changed. Also one of the three short stories by Jason, basically tells the same gag as Tom Gauld's story. They are both cute enough in themselves but collectively the effect of both is diminished and you're left wondering why they couldn't have been spaced over two different issues maybe.
An excellent cover, also by Jason sets the tone, a cheeky sparrow twittering on the shoulder of Mr Grim. Buy this comic (or at the very least steal Sylvia Farago's pants from her washing line). Sturgeon White moss is available from: 21 Warren Court, Euston Rd, London. Priced £5

GIANT CLAM #3
Posted by Andy Luke

The set-up for Giant Clam is this. Ralph Kidson headlines accompanied by two or three support acts with short strips or cover illustrations. Martin Meeks turns in covers and one-page illustrations that are filled with detail and appliance. At first this looks quite odd, given the amount of white usually hanging around a Ralphie comic. Kidson's 'Stick and Envelope' strips here are not among his stronger pieces, although as often, even Low Strength Ralphie is enough to divert the head urgently and laugh out a

fit. Andrew Luke fulfills his lifelong ambition and gets a one page Transformers comic published here. I'm told this has nothing to do with the death threats made on Kidson's grandson, but rather a mutual appreciation. Whatever, it's much too short although as a preview for what Luke has stored up for later this year, it's pretty interesting. The absolute star of this book is Tim Brown, almost worth the asking price alone. Various strips over three pages, an autobiography with uber-celebrity Kidson. "Hey! Hey! It's Ralphie!" had me in stitches, as it manages to capture the actual Kidson persona on the page. Funny, and probably scientific as well If Brown keeps 'shitting out gems' such as this, then I have no doubt he'll prove Kidson's worthy successor. If anything should ever happen to him Ha ha! Ha!

A welcome feature is the free pull-out by Toby Parsons aka 'the Burgess Hill Bobby Davro'. Ralph sent some of Toby's works in my direction last year. If Toby is new on the scene, he's easily one of the most impressing newcomers in years. His style of broken pictures, and thick black markers diverting the most delicate of messages is powerful, and sticks in the memory for a very long time. 'See through windows and hear through walls" is a collection of illustrations designed to provoke thought and create refection. It certainly succeeds in doing so, and the visuals are quite often of surreal quality.
Ralph shows here he still has it, and this is reflected in the asking price of a pound, plus about 40p p+p. 3 Langrideges Close, Newick, East Sussex, BN8 4LZ. I'll personally refund all dissatisfied customers. Nice one!

Walking in from the rain I took some comfort from old memories Little had changed -- the beautiful statues and candles... a lingering smell of incense...
COR JES
Clever theatrics which ultimately couldn't help me forget my problems.
CHURCH NOTICES
Excuse me I need to speak to somebody anybody
Yes. I am a priest call me Sean -
Father, I am not a good husband Yesterday I was VIOLENT toward my wife -- I feel TERRIBLE GUILT
I see.. well, you know Our Lord will grant you FORGIVENESS in the Sacrament of Confession. Why not come back at 5 30?
Why not? I don't need that claptrap.
Hm. Then for now I can only suggest that a PSYCHOLOGIST might relieve your burden --
He or she would probably say you are suffering from LOW SELF-ESTEEM
A PSYCHOLOGIST? You think I'm MAD also?
No! I was just...
You, sir, are a bloody IDIOT!

DON'T TREAD ON MY ROSARIES
POSTED BY PETE ASHTON

Almost regardless of the content this collection of John Bagnall's work is welcome. Bagnall can be considered one of the "Escape Artists", small press cartoonists who appeared in that seminal magazine in the mid 1980s under the editorship of man-at-the-crossroads Paul Gravett. The impact of artists such as Glenn Dakin, Eddie Campbell, Chris Reynolds, Ed Pinsent, Phil Elliott and the rest has slowly grown in the decades following, most notably inspiring the current wave of American cartoonists in the Drawn & Quarterly and Top Shelf stables, while Campbell's autobiographical history of this period in *How To Be An Artist* brought this quiet but fertile period to a wider audience.

And yet, with the exception of Campbell's prodigious output and Top Shelf's Dakin collection, very little of the Escape Artists work has been made widely available. Adding somewhat to the mystique of the era, aficionados would hunt down dog-eared fanzines and dusty Harrier comics, sometimes hitting the mother-lode of the early A5 issues of Escape itself. This was brought home to me when I realised that, despite being one of these aficionados of the Escape scene and with a massive collection of British small press comics I had seen but a handful of comics by John Bagnall and, with one exception, nothing over three pages long. And so, when I got my copy of *Rosaries* (Art above) it almost didn't matter what the quality was like. Of course, there was a slight fear that it might be rubbish, or at least that it might not live up to expectations.

I'm happy to say my expectations were exceeded. As I said, prior to this book I'd read some very short pieces and the not-strictly-a-comic *Nation of Shopkeepers* mini, so to start off with a 27 page epic was great. "The Chemist and the Capuchin" brings immediately to mind Ed Pinsent's work in execution but also in the underlying religious theme and evocation of a certain post-war Englishness. And yet I can't currently think of a Pinsent piece it directly resembles. The story reads like a religious pamphlet - a British Catholic Jack Chick without the malicious bigotry - rejecting modern ideas such as tupperware and Freudian psychoanalysis in favour of the wisdom of a stigmatic Capuchin friar from an Italian mountain village. The tale is played so straight it's hard to see the irony, if it's there at all, and Bagnall's intentions, if they're not evangelical, are hidden behind the straight talking characters. To find such a piece by a cartoonist I previously only thought of as a post-punk concentrating on themes from his 70s British childhood is rather disorientating in a quite wonderful way. Is it a joke, as the title of the collection implies? Is it deadly serious? It certainly doesn't exhibit the detached observation of Bagnall's other strips. And beyond these speculations it's a wonderful piece on its own that bears re-reading
"The Chemist..." takes up a third of the book the rest being a selection of previously published strips along with some new to this collection. Here Bagnall visits what I assumed to be his stomping ground - the rich but subtle social landscape of urban northern England in the 1970s, a world fascinatingly alien to anyone under 30 as it was violently swept away by the reforming

80s. The relative oddness of this era has been mined recently by Jonathan Coe in his novel *The Rotters Club* and Bagnall has an equally keen eye.

Within the book the piece "A Nation Of Shopkeepers" finds a context lacking when it was published as a pamphlet. A series of 11 portraits of gloriously ugly English folk in 70's shops, these at first look flat and static, the characters set in angular poses and seemingly staged for some ill-conceived promotional postcard. But look closer and you can spot a sly wink, and exchange of glances and an aura of comfort. Amongst the grime, bad teeth, terrible hair and limited opportunities these people come across as quietly happy. Is this a criticism of what was to follow, or a rose-tinted retrospective glance at a time gone by? Is Bagnall reminding us of something we've lost in the rush to self improvement and the doubt and angst that necessarily came with it? Does he really have the audacity to suggest that people were happy with their lot in the years leading to the winter of discontent? If so, then this is a much more potent piece than it first appears. Which, I should add, is probably a key trait of the Escape artists.

This rejection of modern ways crops up again in another Catholic-related tale, though in "Our Lady Of The Tower Block" the church is the oppressive force. Miss Buchanan has just started teaching at Our Lady of Fatima, a 70s inner city comprehensive school, but she's having trouble settling in and is developing a taste for the sherry. The nuns expect her to join in gatherings run by Brendan Cass, a charismatic young evangelical biker who's intentions towards her Miss Buchanan finds suspect. With the nuns, Brendan and the wild school kids getting too much she finds solace in a hairdressers that could be taken directly from "Nation of Shopkeepers" with its straight talking, fag smoking manageress. Brendan is clearly the villain of the piece, brainwashing the nuns and drawing them into a world where dissent is forbidden, while salvation is to be found in the safe, ordinary world where a lack of radical change brings wisdom and kindness.
One piece that sticks out somewhat is "Get My Own Groceries", a short snappy parody of David Bowie's time spent slumming it in Berlin to escape the limelight of Ziggy Stardust. Told in a diary style ("We made it through the Iron Curtain and had a great day. East Berlin has a repressed feeling - something boiling under") we follow Bowie as he tries to get real again, and we laugh as he completely misses the point, desperately seeking out poverty, loneliness and brutality to inspire his music - a kind of reality tourism. But as the hip middle class kids flooding into the deprived east end of London seeking some kind of reality find, you can't just buy into this world and expect it to be authentic.

"Groceries" was done in 1996 and seemed an odd piece to include but it does seem to act as a cautionary tale. It's easy to become seduced by the 70s world Bagnall has created, especially if you're disillusioned with the surface and cynicism of Blair's Britain. This is the pre-globalisation world of communities where people looked out for each other and had a faith in other than money and it represents something lost, something that we might want to reclaim. But nostalgia in and of itself is not worth a jot and David Bowie's inability to "get it" is a warning to those seduced by Bagnall's work and, I suspect, to Bagnall himself.
The beauty of the John Bagnall's work show here is in its simplicity. The strips can be read as glib jokes and still have great validity and there are messages in here that aren't hard to pull out. But what separates it from more mediocre fare is that he allows you the space to meditate. There is clutter and noise but the reader is not forced to rush on through the book. The simple dialogue, which at times seems drawn from a 60's American comic book, and parable-style plots allow Bagnall to dig deep and uncover something quite unique. And then, having found this something he leaves it there for you to find yourself.
Published by Kingly Books, 80pp GN, £9.00 / US$14.00 / Euro 12.00, ISBN 095316392X

GIRLY COMIC 3
POSTED BY JOHN ROBBINS
Well crafted but unremarkable, Girly Comic #3 offers a pleasing diversity of art styles and subject matters, but is insubstantial and uninvolving. It's the kind of thing that slips past, leaving no trace on the memory - not necessarily a bad thing, but certainly far from satisfying.

Slight, indulgent pieces surface in the form of the polished but pedestrian 'Simple Simon', the appealingly primitive but clumsily delivered 'Housekeeping Tips', the skilled, animatory 'Da Hood' and the tired parody, 'Dr Love Monkey'. 'My Dead And Me' and 'The Cull' at least suggest the possibility of depth, but lose their way, albeit in a diverting manner. The curious 'Oddcases' employs a disarming matter-of-fact approach to the subject of phantom birthing and combines with a delicate, gay artwork to produce a sedate reading experience that is peculiarly seductive. Equally engaging is 'An Open Book'; however, the Vertigo-affected gift/curse take on ESP stifles the impressively sophisticated artwork with chunks of exposition and asks only of the artist that he do *his thing* with just talking heads to play with. He does so with nonchalant swagger.

In **The Girly Comic**, editor Selina Lock has an anthology of solid, well executed strips. That these strips fail to engage emotionally and are more insipid than inspirational will probably not register with a 'teen audience. Adult small press enthusiasts probably won't care either.

A5, 44 pages, colour/B&W, 2.50 + 50p postage from: 38 Clarkes Road, Wigston, Leicester LE18 2BE. Check the Girly site for further details, or email: selina.lock@ntlworld.com
Posted on July 18, 2003

PILOT
POSTED BY NEILL CAMERON
Pilot is a light-hearted tale concerning the adventures of a girl who, whilst wandering home through a field, accidentally stumbles upon and somehow mysteriously 'bonds' with some kind of alien spaceship. The ship is a sentient being which follows our hero's every vocal command, with a tendency towards being pedantic and over-literal Exciting adventures and much flying about the place follow.

If this sounds a bit like Flight of the Navigator, that's because it is. I'm not even going to call it a 'spin' or a 'take' on Flight of the Navigator. It just IS Flight of the Navigator.

(For our less cultured readers: Flight of the Navigator is a 1986 Disney movie concerning the adventures of a boy who, whilst wandering home through a field, accidentally stumbles upon and somehow mysteriously 'bonds' with some kind of alien spaceship. The ship is a sentient being which follows our hero's every vocal command, with a tendency towards being pedantic and over-literal. Exciting adventures and much flying about the place follow.)

I don't wish to appear overly negative here - to me, Flight of the Navigator represents the absolute zenith of the mid-1980s kids fantasy-adventure-comedy-sci-fi genre, and certainly the finest achievement to date in the career of Sarah Jessica Parker. If only it could have shoe-horned in a storyline where a child magically swaps bodies with one of their parents, it would perhaps be my favourite film of all time

To return to the point; Pilot is a marvellously fun read. It has energetic, stylish manga-influenced art and a very strong sense of design. It cost 50 pence and gave me several minutes of happiness, and I consider that a pretty wonderful thing. It does not particularly redefine the possibilities of sequential graphic literature, but on the other hand it is FUN. Reading this comic is like stuffing your face with crispy m&ms and cherry coke and pogoing till you pass out at a Bis concert. Or, you know, whatever you consider fun. Two issues available to date, I believe - check out Mitzy's exceptionally nice-looking website at www.goonpatrol.com for more details

God sneaks out the back of creation for a fag
Posted by Andrew Luke

Another Anglo-Caption art object sensation. I haven't finished looking at this, and I probably won't for a while. I leave it lying around obvious, pick it up and gaze at a few panels. Which is really were comics should be. Not Laura Palmer: wrapped in plastic and stuck in a box. Yeah, so a minor meditation were Ralph literally shows us bearded deity through the puff by puff of smoking a cigarette. (I'd name the brand, but I don't want to offend anyone:) I'm usually a little disappointed when Ralph does his non - vomit your laughter books, however this is... I'm sure I like it too. Friendly and informal. (He also sent me a very funny letter, so buy the book and Ralphie can afford Cuba). Only available from Ralph Kidson, 3 Langridges Close, Newick, East Sussex, BN8 4LZ £1.

THE BRISTOL REVIEW...

By Gordon Johnston

Each issue, REDEYE hopes to have a special review section of comics, old and new, picked up at a recent festival. This issue, Gordon Johnston goes through his swag from Bristol 2003:

"I spent an obscene amount of money on small press comics at this year's Bristol Comic Fair. Although I enjoyed every title I bought, I had a nagging feeling that my over-blown expenditure wouldn't be fully excused until I passed on at least some of my comments back to the respective creators."

Violent Comics #'s 1,2,3

I really liked this, and it was possibly my favourite anthology title of the lot. The artwork was consistently well done and the writing was very tight in all of the strips. By constraining each story to 3 pages the plotting is forced to be punchy and to the point, while the large page format makes the read more fun, and is very friendly to the (generally) detail heavy artwork.

I've seen Paul J Holden's artwork in a few titles now, and it's obvious that he could give most professional artists a run for their money. He seems to be in complete control of what he draws. Jim Campbell's work was perhaps at first not quite so strong, but by issue 2 he seemed to have also settled on very confident and individual style. I'm especially impressed that these two were able to produce 4 of the strips from #2, all with different looks and tones. Simon Fraser's art was also very witty and attractive, and reminded me of Louis Simonson.

As with most anthologies, the stories themselves seem to have more success when they steer clear of the 'continuing thread' plot style. The diverse mix of genres is one of this title's greatest strengths, ranging from crime to horror and science fiction. But then the inclusion of the medieval parody 'Siege on Castle Aldermarsh' in #3 came as a surprising and welcome digression. Characters like 'Tallyman' and 'Mitch Molotov' are completely clichéd, but are executed with such skill and attention to detail that they are instantly enjoyable. As long as a reasonable frequency of rotation is maintained between these types of characters, this tone could remain fresh for a long while.

Professional in production, yet irreverent in content, Violent comics aren't very clever, but they are big and funny.
CONTACT:mikie@wurzzz.demon.co.uk

Bulldog Adventure Magazine (BAM!) #'s 22, 23, 24

The BAM team certainly stood out at the comics fair, as they seemed to be veterans of the small press circuit. Producing a small-press title for 10 years is an amazing feat. Overall, the title did feel like it had a great deal of history behind it, and as I read it, I couldn't help but feeling I was being let in on one of the small-press's best kept secrets.

The artwork on the Bulldog strips was consistently of high quality and of a professional level (not surprising since some of the artists are on the 2000AD payroll). I particularly liked Chris Askham's (Bob Burden/Jim Lawson –esque) scratchy style and Ed Traquino's ultra tight high contrast art. The true artistic highlights however were the Herge inspired artwork of Garen Ewing on 'Rainbow Orchid' and Paul Harrisons gorgeous child-like scrawls on 'Simian Smith. Primate Detective'.

The main storyline seems to be going through a new reader-friendly style overhaul recently, which did catch my attention, but it does seem to be developing quite slowly. The politics of the 'police-state british government' storyline is also a bit dodgy, especially as it seems to be taking a major dig at our current PM (Grant Morrison did the same thing with the early 90's 'Dare' mini-series, but that was with Maggie Thatcher, a figure who was already pretty universally demonised). The real-life inferences do cast an uncertain and perhaps slightly detrimental shadow over a heroic character who we are supposed to sympathise with. Having said that, recent developments in the real world suggest that the writers have been eerily prophetic. This is a very intelligently written comic book, and a few more twists in the following issues wouldn't be out of place.

It occurs to me that this is a comic produced by the original Eagle reading generation, and may even be intended as a pastiche to it. I really hope this runs for another 10 years; it would be a shame for me to have just found out about 'national treasure' and have it disappear.
CONTACT.kingsunset@yahoo.com

Killer Bunny Comics #'s 1,2

Judging by the rusted staples on these comics, they were produced at least 3 or 4 years ago, but hopefully my feedback will still be of some use. This is a strong stab at the oversize anthology format, and is if anything, even more kinetic and unpredictable than the rest. Once again, the artwork was strong: with Leigh Gallagher's being ultra energetic and completely professional, perfectly suited to the snappy and humorous 'Chicken's Claw' storyline. Stuart McCarthy's stylised hyrogliphic style lends a sense of history and grandeur to his ambitious Dune-style epic 'Steel Horizon'. Viard's minimalistic artwork was perhaps not best suited for his fast paced action storyline, although the fluid storytelling and succinct scripting made up for this.

It was a shame then that #2 was reduced in pagesize, as it featured some truly epic artwork from Joe Alderslade; like George Perez and early John Byrne he seemed able to produce panels that were simultaneously futuristic and historic, epic in scale and ultra-detailed. He had no trouble conveying a dialogue heavy and complex storyline in just 5 pages, and I'd be interested to see what he's done since.

The only problem with these storylines is that they would all perhaps have been better suited to their own titles, and really required more than the standard 3-5 pages to do their epic scales justice. The pin-ups and promotional sketches littered through the two issues were great fun and welcome digressions, but they did seem to confuse the reader, making it unclear where the boundaries of each storyline were. Perhaps a little more development at the editing stage may have helped this. Having said that, at 36 pages, Killer Bunny comics is a big anthology, perhaps with some organisational room for improvement but with a great deal of talented work between it's covers.
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Japan!! & Heroes

From the same stall as 'Killer Bunny Comics', I also bought a pseudo-manga anthology called 'Japan!!', the brainchild of David Goodman. Goodman produced many of the strips himself, and the mixture of satire and affection in them towards the eastern subject is very likeable. His artwork is also simple and bold, stylising very well several different aspects of Japanese influences on popular culture. Jim McGee's one page strip was a highlight, I've never seen his work before but will look out for it now, as he portrays perfectly a childlike parable in just 6 panels and no (english) words. Although I'm not a fan of Manga, I still recognised the charm in this humorous and friendly compilation.

I also bought the 'Heroes' charity comic from this stall. Produced by Arthur Goodman, this featured around 40 small press artists revealing their biggest influences. Small press comics are notorious for not making the creator any money, so one which donates it's proceeds to a good cause is especially impressive. I hope there are many more where this came from!
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Louis: Red Letter Day & Lying to Clive

I actually bought the first Louis book, 'Red Letter Day', at the 2002 comic fair. On seeing Metaphrog in attendance again in 2003, I tried to tell them how much I had enjoyed their previous outing. All I could offer was that "it reminded me of the Truman show". It turned out that neither of them really know the movie that well, but I

them really know the movie that well, but I stand by the analogy, especially as I have since revisited the first book.

The immediate likeness to 'Truman' would of course be a similar(ish) turn of events at the finale of each of the stories. But it doesn't end there· Red Letter Day has an intrinsic cinematic feel to it, the occasional large scale panels are set up like panning shots, the dialogue reads like a movie scripts (albeit a bizarre kids movie), the POV's are often reminiscent of camera angles (viewed through bottles or often from a high angle). Also similar to the Carrey movie, the main character is a complete innocent, unwittingly trapped in a world which is surveying him and may not have his best interests at heart.

Two other things Louis reminds me of: Belle & Sebastian and the Little Prince. Perhaps the former is a subliminal link because of the shared Glasgow heritage, but I can't help imagining the child-like semi tragic dialogue being read out on one of the band's bittersweet ballads. The Little Prince comparison is partly because the gorgeous water-colour artwork is highly reminiscent of Saint Exupery, but more so because of the similarity in the main characters of both tales; both feature a forever young protagonist, whose only companion he feels a great love and dependence on. Although the scope and satire of the classic French children's story is far wider and deeper than Louis', both stories tug the heart strings in an undeniably powerful way.

Having said all that, I found it much harder to scrutinise, analyse and possibly to connect with the second Louis book, 'Lying to Clive'. This volume expands on the world already set up in the first, introducing many new characters and settings, while attempting to do justice to the returning characters. It is certainly a much more complicated storyline, with multiple antagonists (the purpose/motivations of whom are not often made clear) and a more apparent sense of danger. All in all, the artwork and storytelling are still lovely, and the script is still bizarre, surreal and completely original in tone, although the plotting leaves many issues unresolved (or perhaps this is to purposefully force the reader into drawing their own conclusions?). Regardless, I am still looking forward to getting my hands on volume 3 at next year's fair!

Pride of an Angel #1
Human™
Dr Ripper's Multiplex #1

I hadn't read any Pantomime press books before, but was immediately impressed by the quality of the titles on their stall.

The first to be read was 'Pride of an Angel' by Robert Martin. This was a very strange book; the gloomy and atmospheric (and gorgeously put together) cover, along with the general premise of a deceased 8 year-old's adventures in a netherworld suggest an atmosphere suited towards a gothic, adult melodrama. The truth is that the characters seem to be completely benign (with monikers like Evil Ian, and Big Barry). The plot quickly develops twists and introduces characters that wouldn't be out of place in a Noddy or Rupert the Bear strip, and that is perhaps a more apt indication of the tone aimed for. It is, after all, a portrait of the afterlife seen through a very young child's eyes. The production on this title was very well done, with excellent panel layouts and lettering. However, I couldn't help but feel that the overly-childish artwork let it down slightly, although I suspect that this may have had more to do with the fact that the pacing of the story was very slow. With the majority of the panels only featuring a single dialogue balloon, minor scenes seemed to be dragged out far longer than they had to be. This first issue left me with a feeling that the creator felt hesitant to truly kick loose, although perhaps this just wasn't the best jumping-on point for a universe and set of characters that had already been well established in previous storylines.

The second Pantomime title I read was 'Human™', by Rich Nairn and Jody Bodian. I've got to say, I thought the cover this was brilliant; simple, satirical, informative and teasing. Like a trailer for the story inside. To be honest, the story inside couldn't possibly live up to the expectations the cover generates, and I was slightly disappointed that the strip did just turn out to be essentially an extended comedy exchange between 3 Dr Zoidberg lookee-likee stooges. But the script is very amusing, in a sort of student humour sitcom style. Luckily artist Richard Nairn manages to capture this tone perfectly, somehow portraying the whole range of expressions and emotions on the faces of aliens who's only recognisable feature is their eyes. In fact, his stylisation is so well developed that the characters almost seem to flow like full motion cartoons on the page. It is clear that a whole lot of fun was had putting this story together (the first 3 pages are a classic example of slowly drawing the reader in while twisting their expectations several times over). I definitely would be interested in seeing more comics from this collaborative team, but perhaps with a slightly more developed plotline next time around.

The final Pantomime Press comic I got was another Richard Nairn production; 'Dr Ripper's Multiplex' from 2001. I enjoyed this book a whole lot, partly due to the pitch black sense of humour and absolute glee with which it unfolds its gruesome storyline. The main strength of this comic though, is the meticulous sense of detail, as each page and every scene appears packed chock-full of macabre, cheeky, unexpected features. All these build up to a sense of a lunatic asylum in which the reader is actually trapped along with the characters as they read the story (the cameo appearance of a background character who directly addresses the reader is an original and slightly disturbing manifestation of this). The artwork, although not as developed as the later work on 'Human™' shows the same animation style cartooning, and is perfectly suited towards the ambitious, busy setting. Once again, the jokes were on a sort of student humour level, but a final page which threatens to make a vaguely serious/intellectual comment on the dangers of censorship hint that future issues may even give the reader a bit more to chew over on top of the (admittedly very very entertaining) toilet humour and bum jokes.

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Akuto #'s 1, 2, 3

I picked up the first issue of Akuto at last year's Caption convention, and saw that it was a memorable, if somewhat cruelly fleeting (only 12 pages!) debut. I picked up the next two issues from the smallzone stall at Bristol, and was blown away by the leaps and bounds that Norm Chung has progressed as a storyteller and comics producer since then.

In my eyes, the first issue had three weaknesses. First and foremost, the storyline wasn't given sufficient space to unfold in the opening chapter, and characters were not quite properly introduced. On a production front, the artwork didn't feature quite enough contrast, making details unclear, and the lettering was quite scrappy. I was so pleased to see that all these were addressed over the next 2 issues, which were twice as big and featured continually developing lettering and artwork. In fact, I would go as far as to say that by issue 3 the artwork really did include some of the most spectacular, well realised and choreographed fight scenes I've seen in any comics, ever. Taking a hint from the Matrix movies, duellists limbs become blurs, flurries of swordplay and fluid motion Although somehow all this is done while preserving all the gloriously researched details on the feudal Japanese protagonists Equally breathtaking is the breakneck plotting, which swings between historical epic to fantasy with ease, and allows for a maximum of action along with moments of tension and intimacy, whilst also giving equal page-space to all of the characters concerned. In fact, the high action quotient and propensity for cliffhangers make this series reminiscent of old Saturday morning action serials. Except it's not, it's like nothing else out there, and along with Norm Chung's rapidly developing skills as a storyteller I honestly think that the sky's the limit with this. Simply put, 'Akuto' rocks!

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Underfire Comics;
Theatre of Cruelty,
Dream Time #'s 1 & 2,
Operation Black Jet #1,
Rapid Fire #'s 1 & 2

I first encountered Underfire comics at last year's Caption convention, where I picked up Theatre of Cruelty and the first issue of Dream Time. These guys seemed to have their sights set on grand things, and it's good to see that their plans are coming to

fruition (especially since I've seen a couple of their titles on the shelves of the London Forbidden Planet recently). The mix of high quality, almost mainstream storytelling, coupled with excellent production values and a punk-rock antiestablishment editorial ideal is certainly exciting, and it's safe to say that this collective have hit the ground running in the last year.

"Theatre of Cruelty" was one of those twisted little stories where a clichéd and traditionally sympathetic main protagonist falls foul of a horrific madhouse, where the gruesome antagonists are ultimately far more entertaining than the hero himself. The main strength of this title was the hallucinogenic artwork of Nick Dyer, which simultaneously managed to use cinematic style lighting and POV's while twisting the panels into impossible perspectives and eventually melting into a full page montage of panels, where the reader's sense of time and chronology are seriously thrown askew. As a showcase for a talented and experimental artist this was a very strong debut.

By comparison, 'Dream Time' was almost completely the opposite. In this case the artwork is pared down and simple whilst the plotline straddles genres and plays with convention. Iain Buchanan's minimalist artwork was occasionally unclear, but this gripe is minimal in comparison to the likes of the gorgeous spread over pages 2 and 3 in #1. This dream-like image of a couple waltzing through King's Cross station is a panel worth framing and hanging on a wall It is unfortunate that Buchanan seems to be a little ill at ease when the action moves to the medieval setting of #2, where the ultra-theatrical extreme shadows aren't used to as great an effect. Still, the premise is intriguing, and although it'll need to try hard to avoid 'X-Files' style episodic issues (as it also features a male/female duo of paranormal troubleshooters), the ability to change setting and genre every few issues should keep readers interested.

"Operation Black Jet" seemed far more mainstream than the other two. With an action packed storyline reminiscent of 'The Rocketeer', and highly attractive toned artwork, this seemed at first to be a very efficient ripping-yarn style comic. The inclusion of a science-fiction theme, some nice post production effects and some cool retro-futuristic design give the title an edge (Cosmo White deserves extra kudos for this). The twist which makes this title worthy of note is the supporting story, which takes place several decades after the first and features a descendant of the titular hero from the main feature. As details of the characters from the first storyline are hinted at in the second, the fractured storytelling antics of Alan Moore on such titles of 'Tom Strong' are brought to mind. And if the writers are planning to continue this trend, 'Black Jet' could unfold into a superior adult actioner, with a few nasty twists down the line

Finally I picked up the first two issues of the Underfire flagship anthology title, 'Rapid Fire' The production on this title (as with all the Underfire titles) is exceptional, from the full colour eye-catching covers to the print and paper quality inside. And it brings the best out of the artwork inside too. 'Talisman' is a very solid centrepiece story. I liked the way it wasted no time introducing characters, and launched straight into a complex storyline which would normally only be attempted a few issues down the line. Colin Dinnie's writing is challenging, but the reader is rewarded by an intriguing, exciting plot with a large helping of fantasy, action and humour. He is lucky though, to have an artist like Howard who has the storytelling savvy to pack a high panel count in each page, and still somehow keep the art uncluttered and attractive. The Beatles tribute, 'Conubus' is a neat little story, with fantastic art, but some different decisions at the lettering stage may have made it a bit easier to follow. On both issues, Nick Dyer's artwork has been a highlight. In the first case, the action packed hell-bound adventure seemed little more than a computer game plot, but Dyer's art; full of detail, character and a life of it's own makes for an involving read. Writer Duncan Salisbury's cautionary tale in the second issue provided a good contrast, instead being an exercise in mystery and tension, and yet Dyer still manages to make each page seem packed with humour and action. As a one-off 'Tales of the Unexpected', this certainly delivered the goods, but it would be interesting to see Salisbury possibly expand on the concept of the doomed 'package' in future instalments. I also enjoyed the 'Lady Guinevine Strathmore' adventure, it seemed like a cross between the 'League of Extraordinary Gentlemen' and 'Dr Quinn Medicine Woman'. Although it was perhaps a little too epic in scope for it's modest six page duration, the fully realised period setting, good natured storyline and always interesting artwork of Norm Chung made this a fitting addition to the title (and hopefully the first of many from this set of characters and creative team). Overall, 'Rapid Fire' is a very good small press anthology. The edge it may have over others is that in it's superior production it is one of the most accessible titles out there to mainstream audiences. The intro's and editorials are ultra cool and bordering on activism, propaganda for the war of the small press on the rest of the world. And there's a strong chance it might catch on.
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Black Boar Press:
Spring Heeled Jack & The Bridge

At last years Comics fair I picked up David Hitchcock's 'Spirit of the Highwayman' trade paperback and his 'Whitechapel Freak' newsprint one-shot. This is critically acclaimed work, and it's clear why; the gorgeous pencil only artwork is impeccably researched, dynamic, hilarious, terrifying and absolutely dripping in atmosphere. The 'Highwayman' was a completely unique mix of high adventure and outright horror; succeeding in establishing a tone and pace that Tim Burton didn't quite manage to nail on his 'Sleepy Hollow' movie. The caricature styled protagonists are highly reminiscent of European comics, as is the oversized page format which makes the most of the cinematic artwork. It's also nice to see a story which takes it's time to unfold, although the denouement/epilogue did seem a little cramped. This is about as stylish as a comic can get without losing sight of the content of the storyline.

The 'Whitechapel Freak' newspaper was an inspired piece of publishing. A deeply downbeat and gloomy piece of storytelling, it does well to retell the 'Ripper' mythology without drawing comparisons to 'From Hell'. This is partly due to the fully realised artwork, which leaves nothing to the imagination of the reader. The storytelling, while jarring and sinister is far more accessible than Eddie Campbell's, and manages to draw the audience right into the middle of the scene (an effect which is helped by the huge pages). Finally though, this is a collector's piece, an experimental one-off format that harks back to the underground comics scene in 60's-70's San Francisco. If only for having the guts to produce an inventive and unorthodox media in a market which is already specialised, Hitchcock deserves praise. So I was glad to pick up 2 new comics from him this year. The first, a 7 page one-shot call 'The Bridge' was produced especially for Bristol 2003. Once again, this is an impeccably researched period piece, and the artwork is as dynamic as ever. It seems more mature than the previous work though; perhaps since the issue is silent Hitchcock has had to concentrate more on the subtleties of his storytelling; or perhaps because the themes of escape, longing and loss are not as gruesome as his previous work. This is a perfectly realised and memorable little comic.

Hitchcock's main release this year is 'Spring-Heeled Jack'. (art overleaf) Although this is arguably an attempt to produce something slightly more mainstream; the pitch of a winged avenger patrolling the streets of Victorian London seems positively superheroic, the tone is once again one of inescapable doom, and horrors in the shadows. The artwork is of course gorgeous, especially so when Hitchcock unfolds one of his gynormous cityscapes, which induce wonder and vertigo. Although the action does not fully kick off in this introductory chapter the promise of winged escapades over these sweeping rooftops is irresistible. In fact, overall the issue feels more like an epilogue than an opening. it is not entirely clear who the main heroic and villainous characters will be (or even if there will be any), but it is clear that all is not well, and the scene is set for what will definitely be one of Hitchcock's most epic tales yet. 'Spring-Heeled Jack' is a unique and mysterious comic, and probably one of the most attractive and atmospheric titles out there. I can't wait to see what happens when it fully takes flight!
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He works alone, and trusts only what he sees with his own eyes
As does Jack Rackham, Jekyll's only confidante
But something
Hah, here we are... just as he described

More Than We Seem #1

This is a bizarre comic. An adult, sci-fi epic, character driven, social commentary. I haven't read any previous issues of this storyline, which didn't help. The characters are obviously already very well established, and no attempt is made to properly introduce them here. The 'story so far' summation at the start is certainly concise and clear, and I'm keen to investigate some of these past issues, but I was still unable to see how any of that related to the storyline which unfolded on the following 24 pages. Perhaps instead of filling in new readers on the entire back story, a more low key description of the main characters and their interconnections would've been more helpful. But that might have given the game away. This is a challenging read, especially with the surreal/ experimental/ deeply disjointed artwork of Dave West and Angela Renshaw, although this suits well the storyline of complex characters in what seems to be an extraordinary situation. In any case, the storytelling always provides something interesting to look at and the excellent lettering at least allows new readers to enjoy the intelligent script, even if they don't fully understand the context I am still interested in seeing how future issues unfold, as I get the feeling that this issue may be a scrappy and slightly dis-jointed window into a vast, ambitious and highly rewarding universe. Of course, the rather neat metallic print of the cyborg Izak helps. I'm interested to learn more about this iconic junk man. He's certainly by far the most thoughtfully designed and visually arresting character in any of the titles I've seen!

The package that Deva comics wrapped this up in also included the WWII themed one-shot; 'Remembrance Days' Much like 'MTWS', the production on this was gorgeous, which added weight and respect to the short storylines inside. The stories themselves were all distinct and inventive, retrospective and never going for the obvious angles. A common theme throughout the stories was how the last great wars are effecting our current culture, or more specifically perhaps, how their lessons and legacy are in danger of soon being forgotten. It is a very quiet comic, but is deeply affecting and entirely appropriate to the delicate and timeless subject matter If all of the 'Accent UK' collaborations are this thoughtfully put together, the imprint could go on to produce some very fine work

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Cheese Comics;
C4, Pritty Please, Whatever

Underfire weren't the only imprint of newcomers at the fair, as I found that 'Cheese Comics' have recently produced 3 new titles. Perhaps more experimental and informal than the Underfire collective, the Cheese titles all seem to not take themselves too seriously. These are produced by talented creators who have not yet fully developed their styles, but still have important things to say and entertaining tales to spin.

The anthology title 'C4' featured a typically eclectic collection of offbeat shorts. The opener, 'Rock Tomb' was particularly well written, with a busy and effective storytelling style. The 'beautiful freak' theme is both sympathised with and mocked neatly, the only downside being that the ultra fine linework sometimes made the panels a little tricky to distinguish. In the second strip Michael Bregman did well to stretch out a literal knob joke to 5 pages. Quite childish but inventive with it, a bit of a guilty pleasure. That the same fella also wrote the third strip, a heart-tugging kids book style tearjerker is a nice contrast. Sally-Ann Hickman's lettering is fantastic, it immediately sets the tone for the simple story. Her storytelling and big chunky stylised pictures are very distinctive too, but once again too much cross hatched linework distracts from some of the panels. The final strip 'Vampy the Buffalo Slayer' is another one-joke strip, but Kenric Morbrough's confident manga inspired artwork manages to pack a whole load of action, humour and clever likenesses into the short running space It's just a shame that the accomplished pencils were not inked in the final print, as this story does have a slightly unfinished look about it. Overall, this is an intelligent and original collection, although some kind of editorial foreword/commentary may have just helped to bind the rough edged pieces together.

The writer/artist team of Bregman and Hickman (who themselves sound like a couple of silver age superheroes) reappear in 'Whatever' #1. Despite it's irreverent title and childish design, this is probably the most thought provoking book I bought at Bristol; a comic with an agenda. The freedom to make outright and controversial social commentary is something which small press comics will always be able to hold over the mainstream. It is surprising then that this is the only title to have handled the current global climate of war on terrorism and blacklisting of scape-goat nations. But far from being just anti-war, Bregman's biting script highlights the futility of protesting against national movements and the lunacy of escalating aggression between countries. The storytelling pulls no punches, and the frequent bad language and war violence is used with such skill that it never feels gratuitous. Ultimately this leaves us with the message that as citizens we are powerless to influence the international events unfolding around us, and worse, that we may be too apathetic to care. Hickman's art is much clearer in this piece, with more stylised panels allowing her childish yet strongly rendered figures the space to breathe. Part satire, part warning shot, it'll be interesting to see if the creative team can produce more issues with as much to say as this.

The final cheese title I bought was 'Pritty Please'. Narbrough's artwork in the Buffy spoof strip was one of the unexpected highlights of the C4 anthology. His pencils are similarly impressive in this, although they still suffer from being not fully
inked. Regardless, with a full 22 pages to run riot on, Narbrough's action packed artwork is highly likeable. It's hard to see how he won't be very soon producing professional work if he continues at this pace. Credit also goes to the scriptwriter, the prolific Bregman, for engineering an issue so tightly plotted which still moves at breakneck pace. Especial kudos though, for developing a comic book where the hero is not just a middle-aged woman, but an overweight working mother to boot. 'Pritty Please' runs like a big budget action movie, a popcorn comic with dazzling design and content, but also with a sense of intelligence which will engage the reader more than would be expected from this genre.
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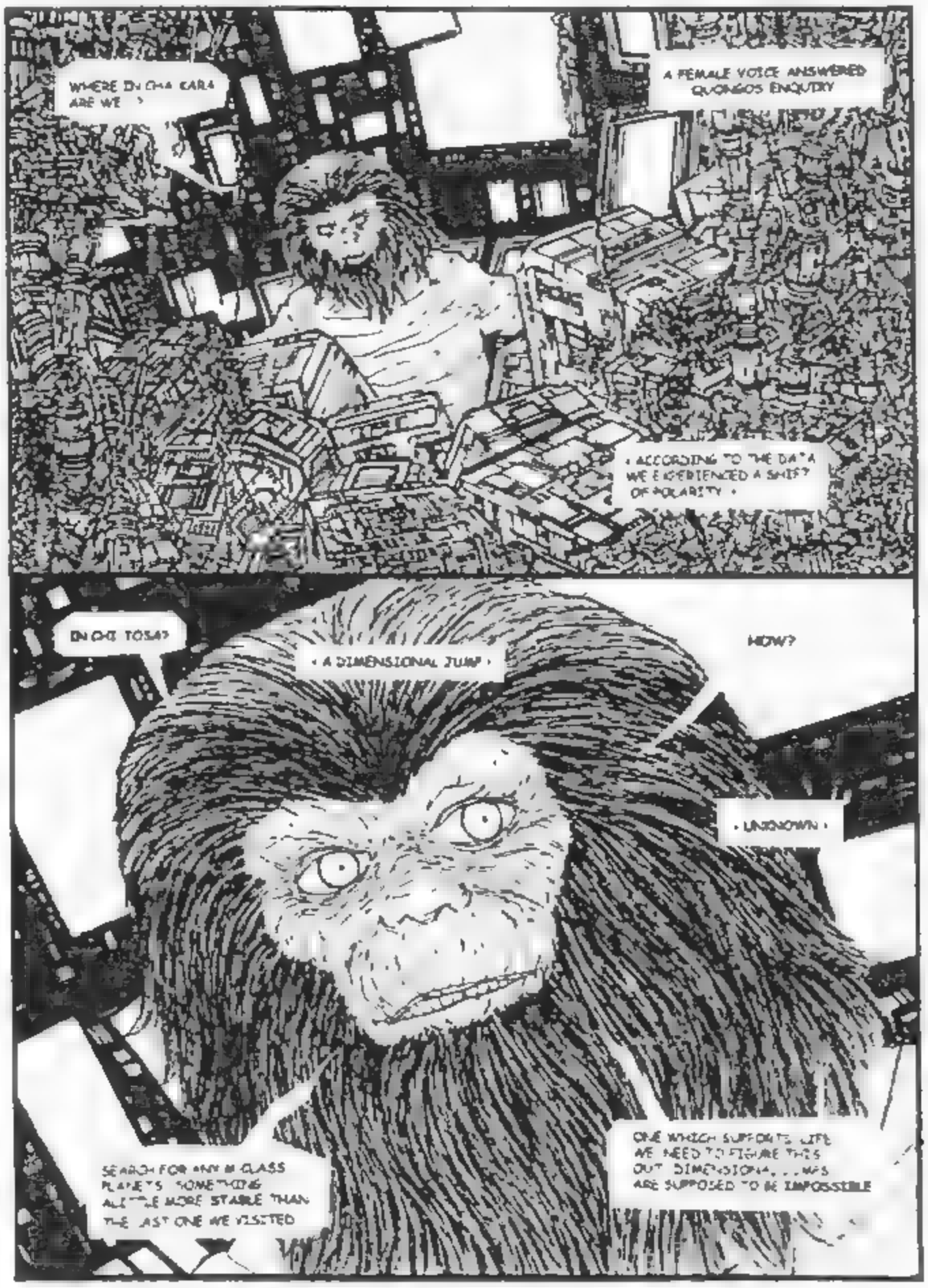
WHERE IN CHA KARA ARE WE ?
A FEMALE VOICE ANSWERED QUONGOS ENQUIRY
« ACCORDING TO THE DATA WE EXPERIENCED A SHIFT OF POLARITY »
IN ONE TOSA?
« A DIMENSIONAL JUMP »
HOW?
« UNKNOWN »
SEARCH FOR ANY M CLASS PLANETS SOMETHING ALITTLE MORE STABLE THAN THE LAST ONE WE VISITED
ONE WHICH SUPPORTS LIFE WE NEED TO FIGURE THIS OUT DIMENSIONAL... WAS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE IMPOSSIBLE

Awkward Fascination V1.0

I'd also like to give mention to a small mini comic which was being given out for free at the front of the fair; David Baillie's small collection of experimental strips and autobiographical strip rants. This is a very brave move, and a very likeable comic. It's hard not to relate to the main tale, recounting the author's initial temptation to the big city by money and a jet-setting lifestyle, through to his subsequent escape into a far less secure but infinitely more rewarding life as an amateur small press creator. This is a very well thought out narrative, skilfully running the line between self-importance and preaching, while keeping things amusing with a great deal very well observed and witty details. It is a refreshing change of pace, a subject matter (growing up in the late 20th/ early 21st century) which is relatively unvisited in british comics and above all a bold statement of self. Hopefully Baillie's further work will expand on the autobiographical themes touched upon so successfully here.
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Cosmogenesis:
#1 The Skull of Muluc,
#2 Bloodlines,
#3 The Sword of Xian

This is the real deal, a full blown space opera. Each issue, annually produced, 30+ pages chock full of outlandish designs and eye-watering detail. A storyline which hops across the galaxy and encompasses dozens of characters, cultures and locales. I made the mistake of trying to read all three at once on my first sitting, and almost melted my brain! Since then I've revisited them in more bitesized chunks...

Creator's Grose and Sulei are probably sick and tired of hearing this, but 'The Skull of Muluc' (art above) reminded me a lot of Star Wars Episode 1. The truth is that the production on this comic probably began well before Lucas' movie splashed down onto cinema screens. Still, the similarities are obvious, both are opening chapters to grand epics, while being self contained adventures in themselves. Both also feature a princess (and her civilisation) in peril, a hidden plotting menace (the Guardians), a charismatic loner antagonist (Bounty Hunter Jo), an everyman hero who rises from obscurity to save the day and an

explosive Jo), an everyman hero who rises from obscurity to save the day and an explosive finale which may hold far darker ramifications than is initially obvious. At the end of the day, I suppose there are worse movies to be compared to, and there was no sign of Jar Jar Binks. What makes this special is that you don't normally find sci-fi spectaculars like this in comic book format. The pace of the plot is breakneck; twice as fast as most other books out there (although this does count against it slightly, as in the first 10 pages far too many plot points, locales and introductions are squeezed into too little space). The writing is succinct enough that most of the main characters are successfully set out with minimal page space or breaks in pace. The real reason that this comic is noteworthy though is the jaw dropping visuals. Coming as a cross between Jack Kirby's ultra energetic storytelling, Star Wars set designs and ultra detailed linework reminiscent of Moebius or Barry Windsor Smith. It is wonderful to look at, and central to the creation of the fully realised universe that the action takes place in. Upon finally finishing this comic I felt satisfied that I had just read a complete, successful and highly enjoyable piece of comic storytelling. I was maybe just slightly disappointed that the writers had not made it easier to initially get into.

The second chapter, 'Bloodlines', shows a marked change in pace and scope of the Cosmogenesis saga. There is much more action, but it is cut down to only a couple of locales, and specifically to one particular confrontation between the main hero and villain of the piece. Only a few new plot threads are introduced here, and none of the issues from volume 1 are progressed particularly far. Bizarrely, this is a good thing, as the storyline instead confirms and solidifies some of the significant events and themes from before. It allows the reader space to breathe, and to enjoy some of the good old fashioned cat and mouse action. I hate to say this, but it was also a relief that there was next to no mention of the 'prophesies' or 'chosen ones' These kind of plot devices have been done to death recently, in everything from Harry Potter to the Matrix. It slightly spoiled the first volume when so much mention was given to various prophecies, good or bad. The artwork and design was still wonderful to look at, especially the Mos Eisley style bar fight at the start. The use of a primate as the main heroic character came into it's own in this volume as well; the very fact that Quongo looks so unconventional makes his heroic ideals and actions all the more noble. As a piece of cheesy sci-fi action with topical undertones of international unrest, 'Bloodlines' hits the target, dead centre.

The third (and final to date) volume was 'The Sword of Xian'. Once again this new book marked another change of pace in the saga. The plot begins to thicken once more, although developments are kept interesting by maintaining 3 different (and seemingly unrelated) plot threads on the go. The pacing of this book was great, achieving a perfect balance of revelation, mystery, action, political intrigue and unexpected plot twists. It has become apparent in this volume though that the scale of the storyline envisioned by writer Grose really is far larger than any other sci-fi/ fantasy epic since Tolkein, with a history which runs 3,000 years into the past and is central to the machinations of the plot. Unfortunately it also seems that the complex plotting is at this point starting to show signs of collapsing under it's own weight. Although this does seem like a move which runs the danger of insulting the audience, would it maybe be a good idea to print a glossary in one of the future issues, to clarify the different planets, races, capital cities, kings, relics, species, tribes, legends and protagonists? The artwork, once again, perfectly complimented the storyline, and a move to using nib and ink brought the stylised cartooning one step closer to Kirby-theatrics. While artist Suleri finds his feet with this new technique, some of the faster paced action scenes did suffer slightly, as details got a bit murky and panels tended to blur into one another. Would it be possible to consider thicker panel borders or slight gaps between the pictures to clarify the layout of the pages? Otherwise, I thought this was an excellent addition to the Cosmogenesis saga. Although it perhaps took me a couple of readings to clarify the plot points, this is also the chapter in which the storyline truly began to unfold and was finally able to shake loose any comparison to any other space operas by a certain Mr Lucas. It all bodes well for volume 4 next year! CONTACT:
www.geocties.com/clownpressuk

<u>The O Men:</u>
<u>Collected Volumes 1, 2 & 3</u>

I've been aware of the O men's existence for some time. It's impossible to look at any small press paper or website without reading the praise universally heaped on it. But I'd never before actively sought out any issues. When I saw that Martin Eden had produced TPB style collected editions of the first 6 (+0) issues I snapped them up at Bristol, and even waited till I'd read the rest of my haul before starting on them.

It's already pretty well established that these comics are good. They're like the comic book equivalent of a White Stripes album; raw, stripped down and without any kind of post production or special effects (even the lettering is done by hand, which is unusual in this computerised age). They are the product of one talented man, using just paper, pen and his imagination. So it's probably already been mentioned that the writing is very very good. Thoughtful, original, deliberately paced and well observed as well as being exciting, amazing, horrifying and startling. I read somewhere that Eden's biggest influence is Alan Moore, which makes sense as this tale of Urban twenty-something superheroes has a very similar tone to Moore's Captain Britain arc from the 80's. Both share a distinctive tone which mixes social realism and super hero operatics with the subtext of distinctive tone which mixes social realism and super hero operatics with the subtext of psychological horror and impending doom.

Eden's scope is not yet as wide as Moore's, as the first three volume's focus only on the plight of young middle-class Londoners, although this subgroup is explored in great depth and originality. The artwork is certainly distinctive too. Eden's been able to use his experience in life art classes to make his figures hyper-realistic and uses the body language of his characters to tell his story in subtle ways The use of shadows and suggestive blacked out areas is very daring and effective, allowing the reader to form much of the image in the mind's eye. Admittedly, in the earlier issues the cross hatching linework was used quite inefficiently, but from later issues I can see that Eden is now confident enough to portray his characters in an even more minimalist and suggestive style. I did note though, that the artwork in issue six, the climax to the 'Frenzy' arc seemed comparatively rushed, although this wasn't too detrimental to the satisfying and well put together conclusion

Some other things I've noticed on reading these (including the 3rd collection, 'Malice', which I later bought from Gosh! Comics in London): the three main arcs in these books all involve mind control of some form or another. In each of the stories some or all of the characters have had to struggle with internal delusions, hallucinations or fantasies brought about by various antagonists. It is a testament to Eden's creativity that this has not become repetitive or strained, but it is certainly a recurring theme. Also noticeable is that Martin Eden likes his girls. In these first 9 issues, the majority of the main characters (and almost all of the villains) are female. Not to mention they're all fully realised, very attractively portrayed and, in general, far more interesting than any of their male counterparts. The last thing I'll say (and this is the only down point I can think of; and maybe this is the reason I held off trying this title out so long), is that I really don't like the name. Maybe in later issues it will become justified, but to me the use of 'O men' and the central premise of a Professor 'O' who lives in a mansion and assembles a troubled and eclectic super team is an ugly rip off of the X-Men. Neither the title nor the 'Professor' are intrinsic to the storyline and original (and superior) alternatives could easily have been used instead. This comic stands head and shoulders above most other superhero titles (small and major press) on it's own merits, and is anything but a cheap thoughtless cash-in, despite what the name may suggest...
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